

John Calvin's  
American Legacy

*Edited by*

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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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# Introduction

*Thomas J. Davis*

The year 2009 is the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. For some, it is an occasion for celebration as heirs of his legacy remember the man and his ministry. For others, it brings to mind negative images of dogmatic religion gone mad with power, an unholy union of church and state. The memory of Calvin often evokes strong feelings, and those feelings are tied not just to Calvin himself but also to everything Calvin is seen to represent. As with the "Puritans" in historical memory, "Calvin" is a stand-in for ideologies with which one either agrees or disagrees (usually vehemently).

The contributors to this volume have taken this anniversary as an opportunity to gauge Calvin and Calvinism's influence on American culture. Some engage Calvin directly; others do so more indirectly as he is mediated by the various traditions that look to him as a guide. Because Calvin's influence was contested almost from the start by opponents, the history of Calvin's and Calvinism's influence has been written either by unquestioning loyalists, on the one hand, or by implacable foes, on the other. Though Calvin's historical presence is large enough to warrant attention in works on U.S. history and culture, one would probably be safe in assuming that, on balance, the foes of Calvin and Calvinism, again from almost the start but particularly in the nineteenth century, have had the greatest success in shaping his image in the culture. Though the careful scholarly work of the specialist will portray a more balanced and layered treatment of Calvin's influence in America, such work does not often make its

way into broader scholarship in such a way as to nuance the generally negative rhetoric associated with assessments of Calvin and his influence. Indeed, as David D. Hall will point out in his chapter, even those who take seriously Calvin's positive contributions still end up adopting the more broadly held negative tropes about him. As I will note below, for example, it has not been uncommon for scholars who study "anti-Calvinist" authors to adopt uncritically the language about Calvin that these anti-Calvinist authors employ.

It seems useful, therefore, to prepare for the reading of this volume's chapters with a quick look at Calvin's life and the stereotypes that arise concerning it. The usefulness of these stereotypes will be questioned, for they not only impede the study of Calvin the man, but they also can cloud one's understanding of Calvin in the culture. There follows a short narrative tracing the movement of Calvinism from Europe to the New World. Finally, a brief description of the chapters contained herein is provided.

Calvin was born and educated in France. As a young man, he saw himself joining the ranks of humanist scholars. He earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in Paris, after which he left for law school, studying at Orléans and then Bourges. After attending to family matters following his father's death in Noyon, the town of Calvin's birth, he found his way back to Paris and published a commentary on Seneca's *On Clemency*. It was, by almost every measure, a failure. It did not secure him a place among up and coming humanist writers, and it certainly did no favors to his finances (the book was self-published, and Calvin did not recoup the costs).

The next time he published a book, there resulted a very different outcome. The year 1536 saw the publication of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (which would undergo major revisions and be published in several editions in the years to come), and this work brought a great deal of recognition to the young Calvin. The work also witnessed to a Calvin who had undergone a conversion experience to the Protestant faith. So began a lifelong journey of applying the skills he had honed as a humanist (and a humanistically trained lawyer) to the foundational document of the Christian faith, the Bible. His work in languages and textual analysis and his concern for the fundamental documents of the faith (among humanists and Christian reformers—both Protestant and Catholic—that was the rallying cry: *Ad fontes!* To the sources!) were brought to bear on the interpretation and explication of scripture.

An exile from France because of his religious views, Calvin ended up, for most of his adult life, in the city of Geneva. He originally was employed by the city government as a reader in Holy Scripture in 1536, was forced out of the city in the spring of 1538 (for what became a very satisfying period of time in the city of Strassburg with Martin Bucer, the city's leading Protestant reformer),

and then he was asked to come back to Geneva, which he did most reluctantly, in the fall of 1541. There he stayed until his death in 1564. Over the almost quarter century in the city, he was a resident alien for about nineteen years, only becoming a citizen in 1559, five years before his death.

Calvin worked to reform the church in Geneva at the behest of the city government. At times, he was influential with the council; at other times, he was at odds with it. The council members forced him from the pulpit on one occasion; on others, they dictated what today would appear to be religious policy—for example, the number of times the sacrament of communion would be celebrated in the churches of the city. This example indicates that his position as theocrat has, at times, certainly been overstated: how could a religious figure be said to run a town when, in fact, he could not even get his way on when to serve communion?

Of course, much of Calvin's reputation as theocrat comes from two items in particular: the execution of Servetus and the workings of the consistory of Geneva. Though the Servetus affair serves to underscore all of the bad qualities of the Reformation and Calvin in particular in today's world, in the environment of the sixteenth century, it was the Servetus affair that, in some ways, cemented Calvin's position of authority within the city, at least so far as to keep him from fearing for his position with the church of Geneva. This is simply to say, the world of the sixteenth century is not our world or, at least, how we think the world should be. (Many of our judgments about the past seem to involve a good deal of condescension; we are oblivious to the ways in which our actions in today's world will be judged by future generations.) In Calvin's own time, however, the execution of Servetus was lauded by Protestants and Catholics alike. Servetus's denial of the Trinity was not, in that time period, simply a religious offense; it violated civil law as well. And there were plenty of executions taking place, for religious and nonreligious reasons, so there is no real need to lay the blame for the entirety of sixteenth-century blood lust completely at Calvin's feet, although such a strategy has been undertaken often enough that it now seems a commonplace to blame Calvin for the bigotry and violence of that century. Certainly, such a strategy is an ingenious attempt to separate out the "good" part of the Reformation from the "bad" part, but such does not make for real historical study (nor for real life).<sup>1</sup>

The consistory in Geneva sought to oversee the morals of the citizens because, it was assumed, all citizens were also church members (the notion of Christendom, a Christian society, was still very much alive in the sixteenth century). Stories about the consistory's actions are the stuff of legend: the heinous activities of the hypocritical self-righteous. And, of course, no modern American would want to live under such a regime. It should go without saying,

however, that the people of sixteenth-century Geneva were not modern Americans. Some obviously chafed under the eye of the consistory; others encouraged the work. But what is clear, now that there has been, over the last few decades, significant historical work on the consistory records—beginning with the daunting and painstaking task of transcription—is that the consistory, at least during Calvin’s time, was as much a complex phenomenon as one would expect. One would miss this only if one were looking to skewer Calvin from the start. There is a lot of prying into what we would consider private affairs in these pages. There is also the attempt to encourage people to get along, to live civilly with one another. One reads, for example, of admonitions that seek to curb the level of abuse in the home: spouse on spouse, parents on children, adult children on aging parents.<sup>2</sup> It is a complicated picture that arises, and the words “theocrat” or “theocracy” only provide, to use a cliché, more heat than light.

Of course, the image of Calvin as theocrat becomes especially horrific when one adds another element to the picture: the fact that he was predestinarian in his theology. With that addition, one has not only the tyrant of Geneva as theocrat, but his ultimate authority is a God who seems even more tyrannical than his servant. The words “arbitrary” and “despotic” get bandied about, and such words have been burned into the American psyche by not only the treatises and sermons of people such as William Ellery Channing but in the domestic and sentimental fiction produced in the nineteenth century by such writers as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Lydia Child, and Sylvester Judd.<sup>3</sup>

This is another case, however, of conveniently reworking history in such a way as to put the “blame” for predestination as a doctrine on Calvin in order to sort out the good from the bad in the Reformation heritage. Though it should be obvious, perhaps, it bears repeating (and perhaps repeating and repeating) that many of the earliest Protestant reformers were predestinarian in outlook—Calvin, yes, but also Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, and others. Luther, after all, wrote a volume entitled *On the Bondage of the Will*. Two things are at work: the first is that, in terms of the developing Protestant theology of *sola fides*, Augustine stands as a foundational figure. Predestination had a long history as a doctrine within the Christian tradition long before the early Protestants came along. They found Augustine persuasive on this point.

Perhaps even more to the point: just as in Augustine, the writings of the apostle Paul carried tremendous weight with many early Protestant reformers. Indeed, one established one’s *bona fides* as a reformer usually by writing a commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, the only letter of Paul’s that has anything like a systematic intent; it was a statement of his faith, an explanation

of himself to the Romans. His other letters were of a much more occasional nature, dealing with quite specific issues that had arisen in the congregations Paul had founded. Romans is different. And therein, one finds stated most explicitly Paul's emphasis on sin, its universal nature, and its consequences. One also finds an emphasis on election and God's sovereign choice, a choice that eliminates human merit as a basis for salvation. God has mercy on whom God will have mercy. Chapters 8 and 9 of Romans was read by the reformers as a very strong revelation of God's sovereignty in matters of salvation. In addition to Romans, the reformers read from books such as Ephesians (which the reformers considered a Pauline epistle, though current New Testament scholarship seems to think Paul's authorship is iffy at best), which talks, in chapter 1, explicitly about predestination and God's choice of the elect according to God's plan before the creation of the world. Though a mystery to them in many ways in terms of its working, the early Protestant exegetes—Calvin certainly included but not singular in this regard—bowed to the revealed Word (as they saw it).

One might perhaps wonder why any of this is important. For one thing, it is a matter of proper recognition so that, perhaps, one may move away from stereotypes that might be helpful for quick categorization but not for an examination of any real substance. Otherwise good and useful books are marred by this, perhaps unconscious, adherence to the easy narrative of old-time history textbooks. For example, in a very good 2009 book on religion in the transatlantic world from the Reformation to the American Revolution, nuanced and insightful in all sorts of ways, especially in its inclusion of previously excluded peoples, Calvin makes just a couple of appearances, with his special characteristic presented as "predestination" (read: the bad heritage of the Reformation), and he is set alongside Luther, whose special contribution is boiled down to "the priesthood of all believers" (read: the good heritage of the Reformation, with the assumption that this is a democratic nod in Luther's thought; it is not, at least in the way that it is often used).<sup>4</sup> The heritage of the Reformation is a very mixed bag, and the tares are not quite so easily removed from the wheat. And, of course, the assumption of what constitutes "tares" is open for discussion: one may disagree with the reformers' outlook on predestination, but the move from disagreement to condemnation comes quickly and easily, and along with that condemnation comes a caricature of the doctrine. But, though caricatured over the course of time in the United States, it does not simply go away.<sup>5</sup>

One may ask, so what if Calvin's reputation has been impugned? So what if the name "Calvin" bears the brunt of sensible reaction against the excesses of the Reformation? The matter of his reputation is not so important as the matter of his influence, a much more interesting project. One could juxtapose to this question a statement by Marilynne Robinson, who has been working to repair



the image of Calvin and his heirs: “The profoundly negative reputation of John Calvin and his tradition, which has burgeoned in the modern period in an outpouring of tendentious historical and social interpretation, ought not to be allowed to stand.” Of course, one may ask of this declaration, why not? I think the answer that would come from her (and does, though not directly in regard to Calvin in this particular instance), is that “[t]o be shamed out of the use of a word is to make a more profound concession to opinion than is consistent with personal integrity.” Part of her assessment is that Calvin is not in favor and should not be spoken of in polite society. His name is sullied in the broader culture, she thinks, but she is not willing to let that stand as a final assessment of Calvin and his tradition. She will not concede to popular opinion. As is clear from the title of one of her works, historical reputation has consequences.<sup>6</sup>

And so to the second point that follows from the first: stereotypes must be guarded against because historical reputation does indeed have consequences, one of which, I would argue, is that a historical stereotype impedes investigation into historical influence. Take, for example, this characterization of Calvin from John Fiske, one of the greatest popularizers of history America has produced: “Among all the great benefactors of mankind . . . [Calvin is] the least attractive.” In a particularly damning characterization, Fiske states that Calvin was “the constitutional lawyer of the Reformation, with vision as clear, with head as cool, with soul as dry, as any old solicitor in rusty black that ever dwelt in chambers in Lincoln’s Inn. His sternness was that of the judge who dooms a criminal to the gallows.” This last statement obviously brings to mind Calvin’s involvement in the Servetus affair. Because of Calvin’s role in the Servetus trial—and because of his predestinarian views—Fiske concludes that Calvin was not easy to like; indeed, that much in Calvin should be loathed “as sheer diabolism.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, with diabolism as one’s starting point, one wonders how the contributions to humankind will be weighed.

Thus, we come back to John Calvin the historical character, not the stereotype. He did preach predestination, but he also preached the love of God and saw God primarily in terms of *fons bonorum*—the fount of goodness. He was involved and certainly complicit in the execution of Servetus, serving as a theological witness in the trial after having alerted the authorities to Servetus’s presence in the city. He did ask for a humane method of execution for Servetus; the council, as happened on occasion, ignored Calvin’s request and opted for the much slower and more painful death of burning alive. But it is also clear from consistory records that he thought the poor should be cared for, that the well-to-do should not lord it over the not-so-well-to-do, and that the church was responsible not just for the spiritual well-being of its members but also for their physical well-being. He pastored, he visited the sick (and he himself suffered

various painful maladies over a period of more than ten years), and he comforted the bereaved. He taught, and he wrote. He preached thousands of sermons, developed catechisms for training in the faith, and helped to create ordinances for church order. His correspondence kept him connected to many parts of Europe. He had friends, and he had enemies. There were those who, in his own time, disliked him and his work in Geneva; a few wrote unflattering biographies (to put it mildly). But there were others who saw his work as inspired, with the most famous contemporary assessment coming from John Knox, when he said of Geneva that it was “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles.”<sup>8</sup> At the end of his days, in 1564, Calvin left a will and testament that distributed what little he had of earthly goods and remarked that he had endeavored to preach the gospel “purely and chastely.” He recognized, however, that he had failed “innumerable times to execute my office properly,” and so he cast himself upon the mercy of God. He died on May 27 and, in accordance with his wishes, was buried in an unmarked grave.<sup>9</sup>

What, then, of his legacy? Some have thought it an altogether bad one, flowing from a bad life. As mentioned, there were unflattering biographies and an image of Calvin built by those who opposed him that developed into some of the negative stereotypes we have today. Such stereotypes are not limited to the United States: wherever Calvin’s heirs have engaged in controversies with others, there arise complaints about the “pope of Geneva.” A 2009 book examines some of these negative images and how they have become part of collective memory (though that is not all the book is about). Another case in point: though he wrote in the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt’s historiographic star rose dramatically in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s with the publication in English translation of two posthumously published books. The son of a Swiss minister, Burckhardt also studied for the ministry and then abandoned that study along with his public profession of the Christian faith. Burckhardt saw Calvin’s role in the Reformation as a terrible misfortune, and he wrote against what he saw as Calvin’s stranglehold on the city of Geneva. Strong feelings are evoked by Calvin and his legacy.<sup>10</sup>

These strong feelings, however can be positive as well as negative. Calvin had devoted followers, as witnessed by John Knox’s statement above. His influence spread with his followers—from Geneva to France, the Low Countries, and parts of what became Germany, to Eastern Europe, and, of course, to England and Scotland. Though he is not the only figure, certainly, in the creation and early development of what now is often called the Reformed tradition, he does stand with others as a foundational figure (many, but not all, would argue that he was the central foundational figure). Certainly, much of the tradition that

follows often will have the appellation Calvinist or Calvinistic. Other times, the movement is simply referred to as orthodoxy, or by some other nomenclature, such as Reformed. Still, it is clear that, in the minds of many—Catharine Sedgwick, for example—what is referred to as orthodoxy has a connection to Geneva as its source and is bound to the name of John Calvin.

Though we divide American history into interesting and discrete chunks of time, it is well for us to remember that, within less than sixty years of Calvin's death, people stood on the shores of the American continent who were heirs of Calvin (though other European Christian groups had preceded them). English separatists, Calvinist in their theology, came to the New World on the *Mayflower* in 1620 (these "Pilgrims," however, constituted only part of the voyaging party) and established a settlement at Plymouth. Other groups followed.

Within ten years, a ship named the *Arbella* brought another group of religiously minded people to what would become New England. While still aboard the *Arbella*, John Winthrop, a Puritan and later the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, composed a lay sermon that most students of American history know, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630). In some ways foundational beyond the confines of the Puritan (and Calvinist) tradition in America, given its place in what is often called America's civil religion (one remembers Ronald Reagan's constant use of the "city upon a hill" language, though other presidents have used the imagery as well), the sermon was also foundational to the specific group of Puritans who crossed the Atlantic. It presented a vision, a Calvinist vision, of a godly society, where members are knit together into one body (the sermon has several references to the apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, where one finds Paul's fullest explication of the church as the body of Christ). And the sermon moves toward its conclusion with a reminder to the colonists that "we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." The first part of the quote comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found at Matthew 5:14. The second part of the quote mirrors the concern of John Calvin (and others, of course) that a Christian society should be a good and proper example to the world.<sup>11</sup>

These Calvinists thus engaged in an attempt to establish a "city upon a hill." As in Geneva, there were successes and failures; contestation—religious, moral, political, cultural—marked the years. Wars were fought with external enemies; cultural wars were fought within. Europeans extended their reach into the continent, finally extending from shore to shore. Almost from the start, there were more than just the Puritans in New England, though they dominated the story of origins for a very long time. And among those other historical actors were other Calvinists: the Dutch in what became New York, the Huguenots

in South Carolina. As time passed, still other groups came: the German Reformed found themselves in Pennsylvania, for example.

Yet, the Calvinist vision of society did not prevail. The passage of time (even from very early on, in the seventeenth century itself) eroded strict adherence to orthodoxy; conflict over religious authority—again, from almost the start—kept homogeneity at bay; the size of the new land; wave after wave of new immigrants; the gradual appearance of real pluralism—these and so many other things doomed the vision. But still, the vision did not vanish completely, nor did the influence of strongly held religious beliefs and practices.

The point of this book is that, despite all of the changes and challenges; despite Calvinism's ultimate failure to hold the American consciousness; and despite an especially fervent effort to dismiss the Calvinist outlook from American culture by sermon (Channing and, after him, religious movements that numerically overwhelmed the old Puritan faith, such as Methodism) or by the art of letters and the novel (Sedgwick and others, yes, but also those deep within the tradition of Calvinism who brought their most anguished complaints against it to the light of day through their written work; one thinks of the Beecher children here) or by the sardonic newspaper column (H. L. Mencken), the fact remains that Calvinism in America has had an impact on American society and culture in every century, even if at times it has gone unrecognized. And behind Calvinism stands Calvin.

And so, at the time of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth, it seems appropriate to reckon with the breadth of his influence—both immediate and mediated—in American culture. It is not that Calvin's influence has not been examined before; it certainly has. In every broad area this book explores (though not the particular subjects of these chapters), there is an already existing body of literature. The value of this volume is in its approach: to look at the variety of ways that Calvin and Calvinism have been important across the centuries. While individual volumes may deal with Calvin and economics, or Calvin and politics, or Calvin and theology, or Calvin and literature—some very well and in-depth—this book gives acknowledgment to all of these areas and attempts to show that, consistently over time, Calvin has had a substantial impact on things American. Here is where reputation needs to be considered with influence: if, by reputation, Calvin is dismissed, then one is less likely to take his influence seriously. While it is funny that Garrison Keillor can declare in one of his standard mock commercials for *A Prairie Home Companion*—"Mournful Oatmeal! The breakfast cereal of Calvinists"<sup>12</sup>—it is also interesting that the people in the audience get the joke and laugh. Calvin lingers in the consciousness, through a variety of cultural and social avenues. It is hoped that this work can help to explain how that has come to be the case.

This book is divided into three broad areas of concern: (1) Calvin and American society, (2) Calvin and American theology, and (3) Calvin and American letters (looking at both fiction and nonfiction writers). Some of the chapters are synthetic in nature: these will explore Calvin's influence in regard to specific themes over the course of time. Others have more of a case study approach, situating Calvin's influence in a particular place and time, or in relation to a particularly influential person.

In part I, Mark Valeri details Calvinist attitudes and economic activity in colonial America in relation to changing circumstances and locales. David Little explores Calvin's contribution to American identity, to the American credo, tracing two divergent understandings of American society back to ambiguities in Calvin's own thought. To finish the section, D. G. Hart takes on the question of Calvin's influence on the U.S. political order, asking if the sort of positive claims made in this regard can bear the weight of evidence.<sup>13</sup>

In the second part, on Calvin and American theology, Amy Plantinga Pauw focuses on a comparison of Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin, arguing that there are "deep commonalities" in the way the two think about church practice, which certainly adds nuance to the standard line that Edwards represented a move away from Calvin in this regard. Douglas A. Sweeney counters the notion that the strife among various Calvinists concerning how best to read Calvin's theology revealed a weakening tradition with the argument that, instead, it represented the vitality of Calvinist theology in the nineteenth century. David D. Hall traces the contours of the Unitarian-Calvinist controversy of the same century, but then he moves into the twentieth-century historiography of Calvin and the Puritans through the works of Williston Walker and Perry Miller, underscoring the power (and ironies) of stereotype in historical study. Finally, Stephen D. Crocco ranges over the twentieth-century terrain of Calvin and American theology, looking back at the assessment of Calvin at the time of the 400th anniversary of his birth and then moving forward to examine the variety of ways in which Calvin's theology has been "quarried" for modern use.

The last part of the book, concerning Calvin and American letters, begins with Denise T. Askin's analysis of the sermons of Samson Occom, an eighteenth-century Mohegan, tribal representative, Presbyterian minister, missionary, and scholar, in whose language she finds an "indigenous" Calvinism. Peter J. Thuesen mines Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, starting with her recollections of her trip to Geneva, to discover that, well before Max Weber, she had arrived at judgments about Calvin and Calvinism that were later hallmarks of Weber's thought about Calvinism and the way it worked in the world. Joe B. Fulton takes the reader through the writings of Mark Twain, turning much of the standard thinking about Twain's relation to Calvinism on its head and suggesting that

the evidence leads one to realize that Twain's genius came not insofar as he was able to disentangle himself from the tradition but, rather, insofar as he wrestled with it. Kyle A. Pasewark, in the final chapter, presents a thoughtful reflection, in conversation with the work of John Updike, on the notion of freedom in the contemporary United States and what is lost when Calvin's understanding of the relationship between grace and freedom is removed from consideration.

My short conclusion considers the work of Marilynne Robinson in its attempt to restore to Calvin a place in the American consciousness free from stereotypes. Perhaps this book will help in that regard, too.

#### NOTES

1. I have analyzed elsewhere the way this dichotomy of good and bad parts of the Reformation played out in nineteenth-century world history textbooks used in the United States. See Thomas J. Davis, "Images of Intolerance: John Calvin in Nineteenth-Century History Textbooks," *Church History* 65, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 234–48. In most of these textbooks, Calvin epitomizes the problems and excesses of the Reformation, with the Servetus affair being the prime example. One author blamed Calvin not just for the death of Servetus, but also for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. See Willis Mason West, *The Story of Modern Progress: With a Preliminary Survey of Earlier Progress* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1920), 148. Because nineteenth-century textbooks used foils as a standard practice to illustrate good versus bad in history, Luther stands for the good things—regardless of whether or not Luther actually represented those good things. Among the many "benefits" of the Reformation was freedom of thought, according to this nineteenth-century historiography (though such an appraisal is not confined to that century; it is a legacy from an Enlightenment way of speaking about the Reformation, as shown by A. G. Dickens and John M. Tonkin with Kenneth Powell, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985], chap. 6 and esp. 130). Luther's stand before the Diet of Worms in 1521 is often used as a stirring narrative to underscore the evidence for his breakthrough into the enlightened world of freedom—a literal stand against the highest authorities of church and state. Of course, what he actually said is often overlooked: "My conscience is held captive by the Word of God."

2. In terms of the picture the consistory records paint, the first place to look is the work of Robert Kingdon (with a second look at the corpus of work produced by the Ph.D. students he has mentored at the University of Wisconsin History Department). See, in particular, regarding the limits the consistory tried to place on physical violence in the family, Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory of Geneva," *Pacific Theological Journal* 17 (1984): 13; for an assessment of how the consistory functioned during the time of Calvin, see Kingdon, "A New View of Calvin in Light of the Registers of the Geneva Consistory," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian Armstrong (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 21–34,

wherein Kingdon examines the role of the consistory in the work of reconciliation, describing that work as being “closer to an obligatory counseling service than to a court” (23).

3. The literature on Channing is substantial, but perhaps one would do well to start with David D. Hall’s chapter in this volume. On the fiction writers who have protested Calvinism’s emphasis on predestination, see Thomas J. Davis, “Rhetorical War and Reflex: Calvin and Calvinism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Twentieth-Century Criticism,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33, no. 2 (November 1998): 443–56. One important point of this latter essay is the way the critics seem uncritically to adopt the attitudes toward Calvinism that the nineteenth-century writers carried; indeed, they (wittingly or unwittingly, perhaps depending on the critic) continued the culture war started (and, on the level of cultural images, won) by writers such as Sedgwick, who was explicit in her desire to see Calvinism displaced. She saw such displacement to be a moral task, as she explained to William Ellery Channing. See Sedgwick, *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, ed. Mary Kelley (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1993), 31 and 30, 36–37. Sedgwick connected “the horrors of Calvinism” and its “monstrous” teachings to “the cruel doctrines of Geneva” (86).

4. See Carla Gardina Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 35.

5. See Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Marilynne Robinson, “The Polemic against Calvin: The Origins and Consequences of Historical Reputation,” in *Calvin and the Church: Papers Presented at the 13th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, May 24–26, 2001*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Services for the Calvin Studies Society, 2002), 122; Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, paperback ed. (New York: Picador, 2005; first published 1998), 260.

7. John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England; or, The Puritan Theocracy in Its Relation to Civil Liberty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), 57–59.

8. John Knox to Mrs. Locke, December 9, 1556, in *The Works of John Knox*, vol. 4, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1855), quoted in Robert M. Kingdon, “Calvin and the Establishment of Discipline in Geneva: The Institution and the Men Who Directed It,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 70 (1990): 167.

9. John Calvin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 35–36.

10. On Calvin as the Protestant pope, see Davis, “Images of Intolerance.” For proof that the image still exists, see Philip Pullman’s fantasy series *His Dark Materials*, a trilogy wherein the notion of Calvin as a pope figure is taken literally (in the world Pullman has created, John Calvin became the pope in the sixteenth century), and I assume he uses the case of Servetus to extrapolate what would have happened if Calvin had gained real power. In Pullman’s fiction, Calvin sets up a system whereby one can become a religious assassin, and the fictional Calvin also orders the deaths of children. See Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass: His Dark Materials*, book 3 (New York: Laurel

Leaf, 2000), 64, 184. A work that looks at images of Calvin that have arisen over the last 200 years in a variety of countries is Johan de Niet, Herman Paul, and Bart Wallet, eds., *Sober, Strict, and Scriptural: Collective Memories of John Calvin, 1800–2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). For Burckhardt's views on Calvin, see Jacob Burckhardt, *Judgments on History and Historians*, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 131, 134–35.

11. Though many abbreviated versions of Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630) can be found in print and on the Web, the work in its entirety is easily accessed at <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>. The material quoted from this site is obviously in contemporary English. Something closer to the original can be found at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>, which contains a scan of the Winthrop sermon taken from the *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser. (Boston, 1838), 7:31–48. Winthrop's assertion that "the eyes of all people are upon us" echoes not just Calvin's general concern about the example of Christian society before the world, but the words themselves are close to Calvin's comments on Matthew 5:14, as found in the English translation of that commentary in print during Winthrop's time: "By which woordes he [Jesus] woulde signifie that they should so liue, as if they were sette oute to be looked vpon of all menne" and "because that all mennes eyes were sette vpon them as vpon lanternes" (the passage contains a reference to the light of the world). John Calvin, *A harmonie vpon the three Euangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke with the commentarie of M. Iohn Caluine: Faithfully translated out of Latine into English, by E. P. Whereunto is also added a commentarie vpon the Euangelist S. Iohn, by the same authour* (London: Printed by Thomas Dawson, 1584; repr., 1610), 165.

12. This line—and its variants—has appeared often over the years. Garrison Keillor, *A Prairie Home Companion*, broadcast July 1996, WFYI radio, Indianapolis, Indiana (originally aired live from Savannah, Georgia, June 22, 1996).

13. One view of Calvin's contribution to Western notions of representative government may be found in Robert M. Kingdon, "John Calvin's Contribution to Representative Government," in *Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of H. G. Koenigsberger*, ed. Phyllis Mack and Margaret C. Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 183–98, which is about Geneva as a political model; for a view of Calvin's, and then Calvinism's, contribution to resistance theory, see Quentin Skinner, "Calvinism and the Theory of Revolution: The Right to Resist," part 3 of Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 186–348.



# 7

## Whose Calvin, Which Calvinism? John Calvin and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Theology

*Stephen D. Crocco*

In *The Theology of John Calvin*, Charles Partee claims that Calvin's influence on the development of theology was "tremendous" in comparison with anybody else's.<sup>1</sup> If Partee is correct, it is not a stretch to say that Calvin's influence on the development of theology in the United States was also likely "tremendous" in comparison with anybody else's. But that remark does not bode well for a chapter that aspires to be more than a dense bibliographic essay or a lengthy encyclopedia article. There is simply no escaping the fact that, to one degree or another, Calvin "influenced" American Protestantism across virtually every theological spectrum imaginable, even traditions that were sustained in reaction against basic features of his thought. But questions of influence and development are notoriously complex and controversial. Put bluntly, one person's idea of influence and development is another person's plunge into apostasy or fundamentalism. And Calvin's legacy has been debated exactly along those lines. To complicate matters, regardless of how Calvin's contributions are measured, American theology rarely developed in discussions and arguments drawn directly from the pages of Calvin's own writings. And when they were, theologians did not draw on him alone. His contributions were usually from a

distance, mediated by other theologians, creeds, catechisms, and traditions, as well as by the passing of time.

This chapter is divided into three uneven parts. The first part “talks about talking about” Calvin’s legacy to American theology. The second part sets a highly selective, necessarily somewhat arbitrary (given the length of a book chapter) account of that legacy in the context of the United States as a nation of immigrants—both literally and theologically. The third part, the conclusion, offers some notes toward a typology of Calvin as a mountain dominating the theological landscape.

A second observation by Partee seems to work against his first: “To put the point briefly and sharply, Calvin was not a Calvinist.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Partee points to the well-known distinction between Calvin and his followers a generation or so later, namely, the Calvinists. This distinction goes back long before R. T. Kendall’s 1979 *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1694* and the response by Paul Helm in 1982, *Calvin and the Calvinists*. Because Calvin did not live to see the rise of Arminianism and the Counter-Reformation, his followers needed to address questions that he himself could not have addressed. The problem on which the distinction is based is whether or to what extent those responses were “consistent” with Calvin’s own thought. Kendall argued that the majority of Calvinists departed from Calvin on the extent of the atonement, for example. Helm, in contrast, argued that there was consistent development and that the broad Reformed consensus in the seventeenth century stood squarely in line with Calvin. The issues behind this distinction have widened beyond the extent of the atonement to include other positions developed after Calvin’s death and associated with his name—doctrines such as double predestination, the covenant of works, and the inerrancy of scripture. As a lifelong student of Calvin, Partee wants to give modern readers an opportunity to hear the voice of the reformer apart from the other voices in the Reformed choir. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this distinction, especially in interpreting Calvin. But to introduce it as an opening principle in a chapter on Calvin and American theology is to miss the ways that Calvin actually functioned in theological work. Moreover, it is to risk making Calvin a museum piece rather than the living resource for theological and ecumenical work that he surely was and is.

Many modern readers have been sensitized to the distinction between “Calvin” and the “Calvinists” and have preferred the more generic term “Reformed” over Calvinist. Fair enough. It should not be anachronistically imposed, however, on earlier generations, who often used “Calvin” and “Calvinist” almost interchangeably and had plausible reasons for doing so. Parenthetically, the dissimilarity between Calvin and the Calvinists need not be limited to the ossification of Calvin by the Protestant scholastics and Puritans.

The distinction applies just as readily to the dissolution of Calvin at the hands of his liberal interpreters, though the distinction is not often used that way. Any attempt to enlist Calvin into a modern theological program raises the questions: were additions to Calvin—the federalist view of the covenant or modern views of scripture—an extension or confirmation of what was important for Calvin, or were they parasitic accretions? Were the things that were subtracted from Calvin for the twentieth century—his views on civil government and double predestination and his anti-Romanist polemics—life-saving amputations, or did they drain the life blood of Calvin?

The form of the Calvin-Calvinist distinction applies to the legacy of any significant theologian: Augustine and the Augustinians, Edwards and the Edwardseans, Barth and the Barthians. In the narratives behind all of these relationships, there is considerable debate about what constitutes a tradition and, more particularly, what counts as progress or regression in it. Certainly Barth, for example, claimed to resist epigones and instead welcomed creative efforts to carry on his work. In these terms, if Calvin saw himself as an Augustinian—carrying on with the best insights of Augustine—surely he could have been accused of an Augustine-Augustinians error. Calvin would likely have argued that neither he nor Augustine were at the heads of the traditions associated with their names. Calvin's contention was that, rather than promulgating any new doctrines, his accomplishment was to uncover certain emphases in the Bible that had been obscured.

The simple fact is that Calvin played a variety of roles in the theological discussions in the twentieth century. The authority of Calvin was not an insignificant endorsement, and he was an important ally in a number of conflicting causes. Theologians who considered themselves to be Calvinists or Reformed wanted and needed to incorporate Calvin into their narratives, and they had arguments for doing so. It is almost as though Calvin had a wax nose—not in the sense that he himself was easily influenced or pliant, but thinkers and traditions needed particular “Calvins” as foundations for the narratives they developed long after his death. For some, the idea or symbol of Calvin was important, and what he actually taught was viewed as mostly time-bound and deemed largely irrelevant for the present day. Others were convinced that Calvin's thought as a whole held up well over the years because it was so clear and biblical. As a result, it was still useful for modern discussions. Many were able to incorporate Calvin into their narratives after improving him by removing or correcting some distasteful or unnecessary features. The picture of a dozen or so Calvins sporting different noses is humorous but accurate. Efforts to link Calvin to particular lines of interpretation prompted claims and counterclaims about who got Calvin right and who did not. These claims often led to

assertions but not necessarily arguments about Calvin. Because there are a variety of Calvinisms out there, it is no surprise that there are a variety of Calvins. Determining how these Calvins contributed to the development of American theology is the task ahead.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin's exegetical and theological writings are a treasure trove for all Christian people. For these reasons, he is a great resource for ecumenical theology. But Calvin was also a champion of Reformed thinking—a part of the ecumenical church that is larger than Calvin. It is a tradition that can be described by its commitment to the struggle over a certain set of biblical ideas. Presbyterian theologian George H. Kehm's description of the predoctrinal biblical themes associated with the Reformed tradition provides a fresh way to look at Calvin's standing and contributions:

All Christian traditions center upon the biblical message of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. . . . [In] articulating that message the Reformed [including Calvin] have characteristically focused upon some of its most mysterious, wonderful and "awful" aspects: the utterly "unconditioned" but also "invincible" character of the divine "election" to salvation; the terrible "judgment" of God upon those who will not trust that gracious election; "sin" as not merely a misuse of a freedom still available but as a kind of hereditary defect, a "pre-volitional malady" of the will inclining it to evil incurable by any humanly devised therapy; the blood of the pure victim "appeasing" the holy anger of God, or juridically interpreted, the suffering of the just "penalty" by the substitute victim making it possible for God "legally" to acquit guilty sinners; the life of a Christian as one of utter "self-abandonment" grounded in overwhelming gratitude for God's forgiveness in Christ, striving to be "totally" at the disposal of God—these are among the most salient themes that have given Reformed theology, in all its varieties, its characteristic shape.<sup>4</sup>

For Kehm, a commitment to stick with these predoctrinal biblical themes is what Calvin shares with Edwards, Schleiermacher, and Barth, and, arguably, it is one of the things that distinguishes him from Aquinas, Luther, and Wesley.

Although the usefulness of the Westminster Confession or Schleiermacher for modern theological work has been debated, it is hard to imagine a Reformed theologian not wanting to honor Calvin as the great thinker of the Protestant Reformation. The challenge for American theology comes into focus when Calvin is invoked as an important predecessor in the theological programs articulated by people as diverse as Joseph Haroutunian, Wilhelm Pauck, Cornelius Van Til,

James M. Gustafson, and Serene Jones. *Whose Calvin? Which Calvinism?* The cynical answer to both questions is: whichever Calvin I need! The more reasoned answer acknowledges that Calvin can and does support a variety of seemingly contradictory claims based on the theories of doctrinal development associated with his thought. That Calvin wrote on nearly every biblical, theological, and ethical topic has given later scholars plenty of opportunities to link their agendas to the Great Reformer. In that sense, in addition to having a wax nose, Calvin also is a mirror that reflects the particular beliefs and agendas of those who claim him for their own. In the twentieth century, Calvin was claimed for and against the inerrancy of scripture, the doctrine of limited atonement, double predestination, the ecumenical movement, democracy, natural theology, women's ordination, abortion rights, freedom of conscience, and many other things. When "properly understood for our times," Calvin stood for just about anything.<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century, not all who used Calvin to advance theological arguments were Calvin scholars who wrote about him systematically or historically. People often used "Calvin," "Calvinist," or "Calvinism" as shorthand expressions for doctrinal, ethical, ecclesiastical, and political views that could be associated with the Reformation's leading theologian. For that reason, Calvin studies—the discipline devoted to Calvin's life, thought, and times—is only tangential to the story of the development of American theology. Theologians and ethicists have a different agenda than historians, though the best ones have made efforts to be sensitive to historical concerns. Their goal has been to find a usable Calvin for theological work, even if that means treating Calvin's writings like coal in a strip mine—taking what was needed and leaving the rest behind, regardless of the full range of his thought or the latest historical, sociological, and economic studies.

The question of Calvin and the development of American theology took on a new dimension at the end of the twentieth century, when hundreds of theologians, both professional and amateur, began to use the Internet for theological work. There are an amazing number of Web and blog sites devoted to Calvin and Calvinism, as well as polemics against them. Most of the sites, other than those that sprang up recently for the quincentenary celebrations, are oriented to doctrinal and historical debates. They seem to rehearse older, perennial questions: did Calvin teach double predestination? Did he teach limited atonement? (Not according to the so-called Four Point Calvinists.) Is Barth's Calvin more Barth than Calvin? Did Calvin teach the inerrancy of the scriptures? What is not clear is how this cyber-theology can be measured and assessed. As younger theologians who are avid bloggers come into their own, the amount of discourse on the Internet will undoubtedly increase. New models of theological work will surely emerge from all this activity. What sort of influence does it suggest? It may be worth asking whether blog and Web sites have any parallel

with medieval notions of influence. In that period, one measure of influence was the number of times a name or idea appeared on extant manuscripts. What sort or degree of influence can be measured by the number of times a name appears in a Google search? In late 2008, a search for John Calvin produced over a million hits. Even if a few of those are misplaced results for Calvin Klein, the number is still impressive. A Google search comparison between Brian A. Gerrish, a liberal Calvin scholar, and Gary North, part of the Christian Reconstruction movement with strong debts to Calvin, shows North with nearly 100,000 hits—more than ten times the number of Gerrish. R. C. Sproul, a popularizer of Old Princeton Calvinism, has well over 200,000 hits—compared with 3,800 for Jane Dempsey Douglass, a notable Calvin scholar and author of *Women, Freedom, and Calvin*.

In 2009 (as this is being written), Calvin is being celebrated widely in Reformed circles, and it is important to remember that, for many people and for much of the twentieth century, he was *persona non grata*. He was viewed as the embodiment of severity, coldness, and a relentless logic that birthed a double predestinarian theology that elevated the arbitrariness of God and emphasized the worthlessness of human beings. For many, Calvin's harshness was epitomized by the Servetus episode, an event that continues to bludgeon Calvin's reputation and that of his defenders. In addition to being cold, rational, and autocratic, Calvin showed that he was intolerant to the extreme when he approved the death of Servetus. Some of Calvin's interpreters simply have chalked it up to the sixteenth century: everybody was killing opponents. Others have argued that Calvin's hand was forced by the eager martyr. Calvin's defenders have tried mightily to cast Calvin in a positive light by pointing out that, though he signed Servetus's death warrant, he preferred that Servetus die quickly by the sword rather than by conflagration. When people are ignorant of Calvin or predisposed against him, however, there is little chance of getting over this stumbling block.<sup>6</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, America's Protestant immigrants brought their ecclesiastical and theological traditions with them from Europe and gradually contextualized them in America. Just how gradually or willingly they contextualized them is one of the interesting stories in the development of American theology. As an illustration, in 1880, many of the European immigrant groups that had Reformed and Presbyterian histories participated in the Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System in Philadelphia. The meeting space was decorated with large banners to welcome international visitors, who would recognize in the banners the signs of their churches and countries. Developing the image of "every man under his vine and under his fig tree," the conveners reasoned, "Certainly the

American church is a vineyard whose growth is but the product of transplantings from the fields of Europe.” Europe was mentioned specifically to counter the widespread impression that “Presbyterianism is a type of Scotch and Scotch-Irish Protestantism—a local product of Great Britain or, at furthest, of Geneva.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps to stress the point that every Protestant in North America was a transplant, there were no banners from the United States or Canada. Two banners hung behind the podium: one acknowledged the Westminster standards and the other displayed the emblem of the alliance. The countries in the council with banners at the meeting were Bohemia and Moravia, England and Wales, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, and Spain. Each banner was marked by several ecclesiastical symbols, seals, coats of arms, commemorative sentences, references to revivals and martyrdoms, and names of leaders. Hungary’s banner, for example, had a seal from the Reformed Church of Debrecen and listed Matthias Dévay, István Szegedi Kis, and other theologians and church leaders. The banner from Holland featured the Dutch motto, “In Union There Is Strength,” a coat of arms from the Reformed Church of America, and an inscription commemorating the Synod of Dort. England and Wales’s banner featured the Puritans, the Westminster Assembly of Faith, and names such as William Twisse, Richard Baxter, and John Pym.

Switzerland’s banner featured the seal of the Reformed Church of Geneva, Calvin and his seal, and church leaders and theologians such as Huldrych Zwingli, Guillaume Farel, Johannes Oecolampadius, and François Turretin. Not surprisingly, the Swiss banner described Calvin as “the great theologian of the Reformed Churches.” (The French banner also listed Calvin, but only after Jacques LeFèvre d’aptes and Louis de Berquin.) Those are the only two times Calvin was mentioned on a dozen banners. This is not to minimize Calvin. In fact, it does the opposite: Calvin was acknowledged as the great theologian behind these traditions. However, given the purpose of the conference—to lift up the individual identities and contributions of the churches of these nations—the banners reflected the historical picture more accurately than would simply claiming that Calvin was more influential than anybody else—even though he was. The banners showed that Calvin’s influence was mediated or related to particular communities and churches by people who had special historical or ecclesiastical connections to those communities. The heroes of the faith of particular nations—figures such as Zacharias Ursinus and John Knox and creeds such as the Westminster Confession, the Synod of Dort, and the Heidelberg Confession—were the paths back to Calvin and the paths forward to the broader Reformed tradition. This pattern—where Calvin is acknowledged as the great theologian of the Reformed tradition whose teachings were mediated both by indigenous influences and by subsequent theological development—is at the

heart of his role in the development of American theology in the twentieth century just as it was in the nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth centuries.

Until the early nineteenth century, American Protestantism was most heavily influenced by the Reformed traditions coming out of England and Scotland, with some undercurrents from places such as Holland and France. Even though the English and Scottish were among the earliest settlers in the New World, their views need to be seen as the immigrant traditions they were. In 1939, Harvard literary historian Perry Miller observed that the American Puritans admired, emulated, and sometimes read John Calvin.<sup>8</sup> Like Jonathan Edwards, a generation or so later, Puritans were willing to be called followers of Calvin, but for the sake of distinction, not because they were particularly in debt to the Swiss reformer. As Miller argued, what the Puritans saw in Calvin was a bold and courageous statement of biblical truths for his time, the very calling to which each Puritan minister aspired in his time. There was no doubt that Calvin had advanced theological thinking in his day. The same task fell to the Puritans, and they believed that God had provided several generations of theologians since Calvin to develop and apply his central insights to their own circumstances. Still, in Calvin, they saw God's steady hand providing sound leadership and theology at a critical juncture in history. The Puritans appreciated Calvin as a thinker whose significance lay as much with his leadership role in the Reformation, an event to which Puritans attached millennial significance, as it did with his theological and biblical writings.

The development of the main lines in theology in colonial America came through the Puritans and the Protestant scholastics. As these theologians developed their programs, they continued to "improve" their understanding of the faith once delivered to them. William Ames's *Marrow of Theology*, François Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, and the Westminster Confession were more immediately influential than was Calvin himself. As an illustration, Charles Briggs's 1885 *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* mentioned Calvin only four times.<sup>9</sup> (And one of those references is an argument for a sharp distinction between Calvin and Calvinism.) In contrast, Briggs mentioned the Westminster Assembly dozens of times. Many "Calvinist" pastors and teachers in the nineteenth century learned their Calvin and Calvinism from summaries of his thought by the Protestant scholastics, the Puritans, various confessions, and books such as W. G. T. Shedd's *Dogmatic Theology* and Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*.

To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, faculty members at Union Theological Seminary in New York—William Walker Rockwell, William Adams Brown, and Thomas Cuming Hall—spoke on Calvin and his influence.<sup>10</sup> All three speakers resisted others' efforts to make him palatable to



modern readers. Instead, they argued that Calvin was a product of his times. Sometimes, he was an enlightened product and, at other times, he was not so enlightened. In any case, he was not a man of the twentieth century, but he was a man whom people of the twentieth century could and should admire. Calvin's accomplishments were staggering and had a lasting impact on the church through the centuries. Arguments went something like this: because of Servetus, we now believe in tolerance. Because of Calvin's exacting dedication to the Bible, we can show our own dedication by bringing all of the insights of biblical criticism to bear on the Holy Scriptures.

The question for Hall and his colleagues was: what is valuable in Calvin for 1909 and what is not? Hall, for example, acknowledged that Calvin's views on the inspiration of scripture and his political philosophy were no longer viable and, thus, no longer valuable. Calvin's conception of the relationship between church and state, wherein the church's authority, aristocracy, and the "moral supervision of every detail of conduct" had a place in Calvin's day but not in the twentieth century. In this regard, Hall likened Calvin to the Jesuits. The Roman Catholic Church needed the Jesuits to firmly establish itself and to ward off enemies. But to get enough space to breathe and grow, the Roman hierarchy needed to throw them off. The same was true with the Swiss reformer. Hall also likened Calvin to John the Baptist, standing at the threshold of a new world. "But because he [Calvin] lived and died for his God, we through him have entered into the more splendid vision of the unfailing mercy and the everlasting kindness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." There is gold in Calvin, the argument went, if modern people are willing to submit themselves to the kind of discipline he evokes. But to get at the gold, impurities need to be burned off and discarded. Separating the gold from the dross is the task of the theologian, pastor, and educated elder. That Calvin stood for things that Hall now repudiated did not stop Hall from saying, "While yet we render all honor to the old hero may each of us in his time and place render one tithe of his service in something like his loyalty and fidelity."<sup>11</sup>

On the 400th anniversary of Calvin, Princeton theologian and noted Calvin scholar B. B. Warfield gave addresses on the significance of Calvin. In "The Present-Day Attitude toward Calvinism: Its Causes and Significance," Warfield began with the bad news: major theological and intellectual currents, whether influenced by German Lutheranism, Anglicanism, or naturalism, are likely to find Calvinism stifling. The good news, according to Warfield, is that there "are very likely more Calvinists in the world to-day than ever before." "Even relatively, the professedly Calvinistic churches are, no doubt, holding their own." Here, he cited numerous denominations with direct links to Calvin and Calvinism—much along the lines of the pan-Presbyterian conference cited

earlier. “Above all,” Warfield continued, “there are to be found everywhere humble souls, who, in the quiet of retired lives, have caught a vision of God in His glory, and are cherishing in their hearts that vital flame of complete dependence on Him which is the very essence of Calvinism.”<sup>12</sup> Warfield’s use of the word “essence” should not be taken too far. With a few exceptions, Warfield believed that the full range of Calvin’s doctrines stood up remarkably well over the years. That was because Calvin set up the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as a “plan of a complete structure of Christian apologetics.” For Warfield:

The elements of Calvin’s thought . . . reduce themselves to a few great fundamental principles. These embrace particularly the following doctrines: the doctrine of the innate knowledge of God; the doctrine of the general revelation of God in nature and history; the doctrine of the special revelation of God and its embodiment in Scriptures; the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin; and the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, it was on some of these topics that Calvin’s legacy was most hotly debated in the decades following Warfield’s death.<sup>14</sup> Although the estimations of Calvin at Union and Princeton overlapped at a number of points, where they differed provided fairly predictable trajectories of the kinds of influence Calvin would have in twentieth-century American theology.

Religious revivals, ecclesiastical and theological controversies, and new ideas traveled with the steady streams of immigrants eager to recreate the best of the old country in the United States. A robust Calvinism in the Netherlands found its way to America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Dutch immigrants in the Midwest set up religious and educational communities where Calvin and Calvinism were welcomed and institutionalized. What are today Calvin College and Seminary grew out of a junior college founded in Grand Rapids in 1876. College founders took Calvin for the name at a time when the Swiss reformer was hardly in favor in the broader culture. They did it precisely because they wanted to make a statement about their allegiance to the Reformed tradition in a free but spiritually suspect New World. In these circles, Calvin—not just Calvinism—was taught and read at the high school level in parochial schools well into the middle decades of the twentieth century. Why Calvin? Calvin was widely regarded as the father of the Reformed faith, and there was no Dutch thinker whose name was comparable. Today, Calvin College is home to the Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, arguably the most comprehensive center for the study of John Calvin in the world.

Eager to embrace Calvinism wherever he found it, B. B. Warfield was impressed with the Dutch version, even though it differed considerably from

his own. Mainly, it did not share Princeton's interest in deductive forms of apologetics—something Warfield traced to Calvin himself. Instead, it favored a critique of the religious presuppositions of different worldviews as a prolegomena to doctrinal work—a direct extension, Abraham Kuyper argued, from Calvin's notion of the sovereignty of God. Dutch Calvinism—sometimes called Neo-Calvinism—took root in Princeton when Kuyper delivered the Stone Lectures there in 1898, and he was followed by Herman Bavinck in 1908. Kuyper's lectures were published as *Lectures on Calvinism*. There, he argued that God's redemptive will extended beyond the personal and ecclesiastical realms to include all spheres of life: education, politics, and art, as well as ecclesiastical life and theology. Viewed this way, Kuyper argued, Calvinism was the only sufficiently robust form of Christianity to withstand the assaults of modernity. Bavinck's lectures were published as *The Philosophy of Revelation*, and the importance of Bavinck's later *Reformed Dogmatics* can hardly be underestimated for Dutch Calvinism in North America. Many specialized theological studies were built on that foundation. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, Bavinck published "Calvin and Common Grace" to show the close connection between John Calvin and Neo-Calvinism.<sup>15</sup> The Dutch foothold in Princeton—with connections between Holland and Michigan—led to the eventual hiring of Dutch immigrants Geerhardus Vos in biblical theology and Cornelius Van Til in apologetics.

As the theological differences between the Union and Princeton theologians entered the realms of institutional life and ecclesiastical journalism, things came to a head in the 1920s. Calvinists of various stripes squared off over the place of theological diversity in the church. Questions about the meaning of subscription to the Westminster standards were the focal point of the debates. After a group of faculty members at Princeton—including Van Til but not Vos—concluded that the Calvinist cause at Princeton was lost, or at least on the way to being lost, they left in 1929 to form Westminster Theological Seminary. Their leader, J. Gresham Machen, reserved his harshest words not for the Arminians and Roman Catholics, whose differences with Calvinism were real and important. But those differences were minor compared with the ones between orthodox and liberal Calvinists. His famous 1923 tract, *Christianity and Liberalism*, would have been more accurately titled *Liberalism Is Not Christianity*, given how differently he viewed the two systems. Machen died in 1937, and, over time, Van Til emerged as the intellectual leader at Westminster Seminary. An immigrant from Holland who was educated at Calvin College and then returned to Europe for graduate work, Van Til was hired at Princeton in 1928 to teach apologetics. He shared Old Princeton's commitment to inerrancy but developed an approach to apologetics along different lines than Warfield,

who relied on identifying common starting assumptions with unbelievers and then building arguments from there. In contrast, Van Til used Kuyper's rejection of neutrality for an apologetic approach that stressed the consistency of Christianity and the inconsistency of every other worldview. He made much of the opening words of Calvin's *Institutes* about the knowledge of God and human beings to stress the properly theological character of apologetics:

Aquinas offers Christianity to the natural man as an hypothesis that, in his open-minded search for truth, he will find to be better than any other. Calvin challenges the natural man to relinquish his claim to be the rightful judge as to whether the claims of Christ to be *the way, the truth, and the life* are true or false and, with true repentance for following the god of this world, prostrate himself before *the* triune God of Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

Van Til's brand of Calvinism, a mix of Neo-Calvinist and Old Princeton influences, has had a narrow but persistent influence on the American theological landscape, even more so in the years since his death in 1987.

In the 1920s and 1930s, American theologians and pastors with an eye on Europe heard about "dialectical theology," "crisis theology," "belief-ful realism," "back to Luther" and "back to Calvin" movements, and "Barthianism." A decade earlier, World War I had stirred nationalist spirits among many immigrant groups. Sentiments favoring Germany largely disappeared or went underground when the United States entered the war. After the war, American immigrant communities shared the pain of devastation and poverty with relatives in postwar Europe. According to Paul T. Fuhrmann, in Europe and, by extension, in many communities in America with relatives in Europe who had suffered, cultural conditions demanded answers to questions such as: how could this happen? And how can we prevent this from happening again? The sobering conclusion for many was that human nature was congenitally diseased and corrupt, so there were no guarantees about the future. Swiss and French youth were drawn to Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Pascal, and Calvin for substantial theological responses to the chaos and destruction of World War I. According to Fuhrmann, Calvin received a fresh hearing among youths weary of war. His theology was an antidote to the "mediocre man-centered and man-pleasing theology" that offers nothing uplifting or challenging. "If we are conscious of this, if we suffer because of it, and long for a remedy, Calvin will help us . . . [and] he will make us realize the grandeur and loftiness from which our Protestant Christendom has fallen."<sup>17</sup> Not all American Calvinists fully embraced the Back to Calvin movement. For many, they had never left Calvin.

Beginning in the late 1920s, H. Richard Niebuhr was actively involved in efforts to broker theological insights from Germany to America. In this regard, he is best known for translating Paul Tillich's *The Religious Situation* and coming up with the term "belief-ful realism" to characterize Tillich's theological orientation. H. Richard and his brother, Reinhold, were part of the German Evangelical Synod of North America, an immigrant denomination that was active mostly in Illinois and Missouri. The Niebuhrs are sometimes associated with the Reformed tradition, but it is better to view them as products of a nineteenth-century political compromise called the Prussian Union of 1817, which brought Lutherans and Reformed together in a noncreedal community known as "evangelical." Not surprisingly, the irenic Philipp Melancthon was the Evangelical Synod's house theologian from the Reformation period. Neither Niebuhr brother was interested in doctrine per se. That was consistent with the evangelical suspicion that doctrine divided more than it united, but it also spoke to the way they used Luther and Calvin. Reinhold often invoked Calvin as the premier representative of orthodox Christianity—a sturdy and persistent but antiquated theology. But he also found in Calvin a willingness to resist unjust authority—over and against a more socially conservative Luther—and he found strong links among Calvin, natural law, and democracy.<sup>18</sup>

Joseph Haroutunian (1904–1968) was an Armenian immigrant drawn first to Edwards and later to Calvin on his pilgrimage to understand the theological orientation of his new country. His 1932 *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* lifted up the theocentric character of Edwards's theology—an orientation he later discovered in Calvin. Haroutunian deliberately distinguished his own theological position from neo-orthodoxy because its obsession with human sin and salvation made it anthropocentric rather than theocentric. In his iconoclastic 1940 tract, *Wisdom and Folly in Religion*, Haroutunian noted that anthropocentrism—the doctrine that human beings are at the center of the world and the reason for it—was deeply suspect for intelligent modern people who knew suffering and meaninglessness. Religion of both the liberal and conservative kinds lost an audience with modern people because their theologians and church leaders maintained convictions that human beings were at the center of the universe's intentions—something modern people simply could not believe. Haroutunian found in Calvin and Reformed theology an emphasis on the honor of God that was not mitigated by the excessive attention Luther gave to human sin and justification. Haroutunian gloried in Protestantism's insistence that God's sovereignty pushed the conclusion that God decrees evil as well as good. Double predestination was, for him, the "last assertion of God's ultimate freedom as He creates the world, a last terrible tribute to the fact of reprobation as known in this world." For this

reason, the doctrine was one of “the iron badges of the Protestant’s wisdom.”<sup>19</sup> These doctrines distinguished Calvinism from theological traditions that suffered a failure of nerve and let down a culture that was desperate for a theology with iron in its blood. In his preface to *Wisdom and Folly in Religion*, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote that Haroutunian set out two tasks: to interpret, in Christian terms, the “implicit religious content of the modern mind,” and to state

afresh the faith of the Reformers which modern Protestantism sets forth in pale images when it does not pervert it. Luther, Calvin and Edwards—read with a humble desire to understand their meaning . . . have illuminated for the author the state of every man in need of God. In them he has found that resolute facing of the hard and unpalatable facts about man and God the twentieth-century mind demands. So he brings the sixteenth and twentieth centuries together.<sup>20</sup>

The debates about Calvin and his legacy that occupied theologians in 1909 were alive fifty and sixty years later, but the Back to Calvin movement and neo-orthodoxy altered the landscape of those debates. Sydney Ahlstrom described neo-orthodoxy as “a period when Augustine, Luther, and Calvin became nearly contemporary theologians again.”<sup>21</sup> What did it mean for Calvin to become nearly contemporary? It meant different things to different people. In 1947, three immigrants—Clarence Bouma, Joseph Haroutunian, and Wilhelm Pauck—set a helpful benchmark for considering Calvin’s role in the development of American theology.

An article by Bouma, published in the *Journal of Religion*, prompted the exchange. In “Calvinism in American Theology Today,” Bouma, who was born in the Netherlands and became a professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, observed that the God-centered faith of the early American settlers was reinforced by later immigrants who came to America with great catechisms and confessions. He listed “the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic or Netherland Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession, and the Westminster catechisms, of which the ‘Shorter’ was by far the more valued and in use. . . . This faith was carried by thousands of immigrants to the shores of the New World and placed its indelible stamp upon our American life.”<sup>22</sup> Citing Haroutunian’s *Piety versus Moralism*, Bouma noted that Calvinism in the United States had been assaulted by waves of humanism and rationalism until it suffered serious decline. The ecclesiastical bodies that once supported Calvinism—the mainline Presbyterian churches, for example—still had many adherents who welcomed the Westminster Shorter Catechism, but the leadership in these churches did not. In spite of this decline, Bouma believed that the resurgence of interest in Calvin in Europe and America would lead to a resurgence of interest in orthodox Calvinism.

Haroutunian, a professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, struggled to begin his response on a positive note. When Bouma “calls for a God-centered faith in the Pauline-Augustinian-Calvinistic tradition, there will be many who will respond with enthusiasm.” In this sense, Bouma’s commitments give expression to a “mood and a conviction which is becoming increasingly prevalent.” However, Haroutunian was clearly irritated by Bouma’s assumption that “in order to be a Calvinist one must be a fundamentalist of the Machen variety.” He further questioned Bouma’s facile identification of Calvinism with the theology of Calvin, his complete rejection of the contributions of liberalism to historical study, his rejection of the Social Gospel without taking seriously Calvin’s own attempts to “bring our economic and political life under the will of God,” and his “utter failure at self-criticism in view of the Bible and Calvinism or Calvinisms.”<sup>23</sup>

Pauck, an immigrant from Germany and a historical theologian at the University of Chicago, also took Bouma to task for limiting Calvin’s legitimate legacy to conservative denominational bodies. Pauck acknowledged the strengths of historic Calvinism in the Christian Reformed Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—two examples cited by Bouma. He also acknowledged that Bouma was right in asserting that religious liberalism did not take the best insights of Calvin seriously. Like Bouma, Pauck welcomed a resurgence of interest in the reformers. But Pauck did not believe that a new interest in Calvin would lead to a resurgence of orthodox Protestantism or even orthodox Protestant doctrine. Although Calvin was interested in doctrine, Pauck argued, it was an interest secondary to his views on the church. In that light, “conformity with creedal and theological orthodoxy can hardly be regarded as the most important feature of Calvinism.” To emphasize anything else would lead to factionalism. Pauck continued, there “is no good reason to suspect, as Dr. Bouma does, that Karl Barth and Emil Brunner do not stand firmly in the Calvinist theological tradition. Yet they have much to criticize in the thought of J. Gresham Machen, whom Dr. Bouma regards as a champion of Calvinist orthodoxy and, as such, as a true heir of the historic ‘gospel of John Calvin.’” Pauck conceded the failures of liberalism to take Calvin seriously, but he saw neo-orthodox interpretations of the reformers as an instance of liberalism’s ability to correct itself. Pauck took Bouma and the whole orthodox school of Calvin interpretation to task for killing the prophetic character of Reformed theology “by substituting doctrinal knowledge for it.”<sup>24</sup> And he argued instead that Calvin’s legacy is more fruitfully alive in liberal ecumenical bodies that promote the unity of the church than in conservative ones that do not. Pauck lamented that modern men and women, given a choice between orthodoxy and naturalism, were driven to the latter out of intellectual honesty. An honest liberalism would have been a viable alternative.

Meanwhile, Calvin scholarship continued apace. John T. McNeill's 1948 essay, "Thirty Years of Calvin Study," shows a large outpouring of attention to Calvin in the first half of the twentieth century, though very little was written by Americans. Despite the distractions of war and its accompanying evils, he observed that "a surprising number of competent and illuminating studies are to be reported"—studies of Calvin's life, writings, doctrines, ecclesiology, and ethics. He noted that the "clash of divergent Protestant theologies has stimulated historical inquiry . . . [and] there has been added an increasing circle of eager investigators who hold him in some sense as either an authority or an ally. Historical investigations generated in controversy sometimes emerge as works of sincere historical research, profitable to the open-minded inquirer"<sup>25</sup>—and sometimes not. What Fuhrmann called "classical Calvinism" joined with "Barthian Calvinism" in rejecting faith in human nature to embrace "a new appreciation of Calvin as the supreme representative of theocentric thought."<sup>26</sup> The impressions were new, not because Calvin had been neglected, as McNeill's essay pointed out; rather, Calvin had been rediscovered for current issues of faith and practice by Calvin scholars and followers of Barth. Even those who argued that they had never left Calvin were caught up in the newfound attention given to the reformer. It bears repeating that there were many students of Calvin in the United States who rejected Barth's Calvin as being too much Barth and too little Calvin.

In his magisterial 1954 *The History and Character of Calvinism*, McNeill staked out his own claim for Calvin's legacy. There, he described the revival of interest in Calvin and Calvinism in the Protestant world and what it meant for theological work. McNeill reminded his readers that the revival was not a replica of the Calvinism of Calvin's time. That would be both impossible and undesirable. Why? "Because of the fertility of the modern mind and the ceaseless interchange of ideas the survival or revival of any system of theology cannot be looked for." Since no one can reconstruct Calvin's Calvinism, McNeill argued, moderns must recover the "spirit of Calvinism." But that quest, he said, "does not require a restoration of the entire system. Any such reappropriation is bound to be selective with respect to specific doctrines and practices." Furthermore, "the revival is not a complete conversion to Calvinism but is marked by a willingness to learn from it and to appropriate its usable elements."<sup>27</sup> McNeill's comment, in a nutshell, points to basic questions about Calvin's legacy to North American theology in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century. What does the spirit of Calvin—or the spirit of Calvinism—have to say to the present day? What are the usable elements of Calvin's thought for today?

How did McNeill answer the question for himself? What we gain from Calvin for today, according to McNeill, is making a "faithful response to the



Scripture revelation of a sovereign and redeeming God.”<sup>28</sup> Although it hardly sounds contentious, it was certainly not without prejudice. In making that statement—surely a summary of McNeill’s position—he asserted rather gratuitously that the spirit of Calvinism for his day could no longer be tied to the doctrine of reprobation or to doctrines of scripture that approach modern conceptions of inerrancy. According to McNeill, these doctrines were part of Calvin’s thought world, but they were better left in the sixteenth century. The trouble with simply following McNeill here, however, is that other theologians staked claims on the very things McNeill rejected as being close to the heart of Calvin’s distinctive contributions to the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

Like many of his generation, H. Richard Niebuhr also turned to Luther, Calvin, and increasingly to Edwards as proponents of theocentric religion. Arguably unintentionally, Niebuhr presented an interpretation of Calvin that gained enormous popularity in the twentieth century, though not through his writings on Calvin, which are meager. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* was one of the most popular theological books of the century.<sup>30</sup> There, he identified Calvin with the position that “Christ [is] the transformer of culture,” Niebuhr’s preferred type of the five logical relationships between Christ and culture. When Niebuhr published the book in 1951, it still made sense to identify specific ecclesiastical traditions with particular types, though the link between traditions and types was never meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. It is probably possible to find the whole range of types in each ecclesiastical tradition. Popular reaction to *Christ and Culture*—apart from general admiration—sparked conversations about the adequacy or accuracy of associating types with traditions. This was particularly true of Anabaptists, who resisted being identified with the “Christ against culture” position. Peace was *for* culture, not against it! By the 1970s, all ecclesiastical traditions and the theologians associated with them wanted to be thought of as being involved in transforming culture rather than being in some sort of antagonistic or paradoxical relationship to it. Anabaptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics made arguments to show that, although their traditions had some historical resemblances to the descriptions of Niebuhr’s types, the traditions themselves, when properly understood, were all about the transformation of culture. But, in spite of these discussions, Calvin was lifted up as transformationist and associated with positive social change—in spite of Servetus.

To contend, as this chapter has done, that Calvin’s roles in American theology were largely mediated does not imply that they were entirely mediated. Calvin may not have been read as often as the Westminster Confession, but he was read, and increasingly so as the twentieth century progressed. Calvin was given four of the twenty-six volumes of the Library of Christian Classics published by Westminster Press in the 1950s and 1960s: *Calvin: Theological*

*Treatises*, edited by J. K. S. Reid; *Calvin: Commentaries*, edited by Joseph Harounian; and a two-volume edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles. The Library of Christian Classics editions of Calvin reflected mainline scholarship and were designed to reach audiences with ecumenical interests. Until the Westminster Press edition, most American students of Calvin's *Institutes* relied on a translation by John Allen, published in 1909 and 1936 by the Presbyterian Board of Education. These editions contained B. B. Warfield's 1909 essay, "An Introduction to the Literary History of the *Institutes*." Allen updated Henry Beveridge's nineteenth-century translation, done under the auspices of the Calvin Translation Society, which also published Calvin's commentaries and occasional writings. For the previous thirty or forty years, publishers such as Banner of Truth and Baker Books kept older editions of Calvin available while critical editions were being prepared. However, the ridiculously low prices of the reprints often kept frugal readers from purchasing the new editions. In 1939, Hugh Thompson Kerr published a *Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Kerr's lean volume, much closer in spirit to the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, received wide circulation in seminaries, colleges, and churches.<sup>31</sup>

The developments that came to be known as neo-orthodoxy mitigated some of the theological differences between Union and Princeton seminaries but exacerbated the differences between Union and Princeton, on the one hand, and Westminster Seminary, on the other.<sup>32</sup> Van Til burst on the conservative theological scene in 1946 with his diatribe against neo-orthodoxy, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (1946). Westminster's antipathy to Princeton for what the orthodox lost there twenty years earlier and for Princeton's adoption of a Barthian Calvin generated considerable polemics.<sup>33</sup> Van Til's later *Christianity and Barthianism* (1962) invoked Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* to make his point crystal clear. Van Til had many disciples from his fifty-year tenure at Westminster Seminary and many others who knew him only by his writings. Those disciples ranged from Michael Horton, the author of a multivolume dogmatic theology with strong ecumenical overtones, to Gary North, a leader in the Christian Reconstruction movement. North established an ethical program based on Van Til's sharp distinction between autonomy and theonomy. Laws were either human laws or God's laws, but the Bible is God's standard for individuals, families, the church, communities, and nations. In an enormous body of literature, North and other theonomists, as they came to be called, argued that Calvin was on the right track in Geneva when he sought to implement God's laws as the laws of the land. These Christian reconstructionists made much of their relation to Calvin and to the subsequent developments of Calvin's ideas

for society that were advanced by the Westminster Confession and American Puritans.<sup>34</sup>

At about the same time that Christian Reconstructionists were writing biblical blueprints for American society and influencing the Christian right, University of Chicago theologian and ethicist James M. Gustafson prepared a two-volume theological ethics that drew heavily on the Reformed tradition and John Calvin. Gustafson, earlier a student and colleague of H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale, proposed to develop his teacher's thought, reinforced with his own insights, to develop an ethics that was both plausible to modern men and women and theological. In *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Gustafson identified the work of John Calvin as the "one decisive generating source" for the identity of the Reformed theology while at the same time acknowledging a variety of expressions. He lifted up three aspects of the Reformed tradition as being viable for the present day: a sense of a powerful Other, the centrality of piety in the religious life, and an understanding of God that requires that human life lived in response to God be ordered in relation to what can be discerned about God's will. Gustafson found strong and direct precedent for his three strands in Calvin, though he acknowledged that these themes may also be found in other Reformed thinkers—Dutch Calvinists, the Puritans, Edwards, Schleiermacher, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Barth—and even in Augustine, whom he linked to the Reformed tradition. However, Gustafson also acknowledged that, "in the eyes of some," his ethics had "left out the heart of the matter [in Calvin's theology, namely], the redemptive work of Christ known in the Scriptures."<sup>35</sup>

Neo-orthodox versions of Calvin and Calvinism gained ascendancy in mainline Protestant denominations and theological seminaries in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Emil Brunner was probably more influential than Karl Barth until well into the 1970s. Brunner's three-volume *Dogmatics*, published in English in the 1940s, was a staple for generations of theological students. It appeared before Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and was far more accessible. With the exception of the 1936 translation of *Church Dogmatics* I/1, most of Barth's writings in English were occasional pieces until the mid-1950s, when T&T Clark issued the rest of *Church Dogmatics* in rapid succession, mostly from 1955 to 1962.<sup>36</sup> Barth's interpretation of Calvin—his effort to take Calvin where Calvin could not get himself, but where Barth thought the logic of his theology pointed—made a lasting impact on American theology. Barth's acceptance of biblical criticism gave his theology credibility in mainline circles. As a result, Calvin was disassociated from modern doctrines of inerrancy, much to the consternation of conservative interpreters. Barth's rejection of natural theology helped to move American theology away from being grounded in apologetics by using a Calvin who relied more on the testimony of the Holy Spirit

than on deductive arguments. (Warfield certainly had affirmed the importance of the testimony of the Spirit in Calvin and in apologetics.) Barth's reworking of the doctrine of election removed the stumbling block of double predestination to the relief of mainline theologians and pastors. His notion that all are elect in Christ was eagerly embraced, while the scandal of Christ being the elected and reprobated was largely ignored. Predestination in Calvin was lifted up as a comfort to believers undergoing persecution rather than seen as the logical outcome of the divine decrees before the foundation of the world. In all of this, Barth's reworking of Calvin emerged as a major force for church unity and the ecumenical movement.

As this chapter draws to a close, it is important to consider two expressions that, for many, are the epitome of Calvin and Calvinism.<sup>37</sup> The acronym TULIP and the slogan "Reformed Ever Reforming" are shorthand formulations of the Reformed tradition associated with Calvin. Both continued to have much currency in twentieth-century American theology. Both were developed in the seventeenth century, generations after Calvin, and both are trotted out early and often—not infrequently as the essence of Calvin's contribution to the modern period. The acronym TULIP—*t*otal depravity, *u*nconditional election, *l*imited atonement, *i*rrresistible grace, and *p*erseverance or *p*reservation of the saints—is a summary of Calvinistic doctrine that is still considered, by many, to be the fairest flower in God's garden. (In late 2008, there was a Web site hosted by a Calvinist-turned-Roman-Catholic called "Snipping Calvin's TULIP.") The slogan, probably also developed in the scholastic period, exists in two forms: "Reformed Ever Reforming" and "Reformed and Reforming according to the Word of God." In sorting out Calvin's roles in the development of American theology, these shorthand expressions have taken on a life of their own—sometimes quite apart from any reasonable resemblance to Calvin. Used alone, TULIP reduces Calvin to a set of doctrines that summarizes the life out of him. Used alone, "Reformed Ever Reforming" reduces Calvin to mean just about whatever a writer wants Calvin to mean, even if "according to the Word of God" is added to it. These distinctions are probably too facile or harsh. However, something needs to account for the empirical fact that ecclesiastical bodies and thinkers claiming deep debts to Calvin look and think so differently. Incidentally, when used with Kehm's pre-doctrinal biblical themes as a hermeneutical key, TULIP is broadened and "Reformed Ever Reforming" is focused.

Twentieth-century Protestant theologians inherited a landscape in which Calvin was in the air they breathed; he affected every horizon, and the bedrock of his thought was just below the surface of every step they took. To speak in terms of a landscape lends itself to a picture of Calvin as a mountain that dominates the geography. Images of Mount Hood (Calvin) looming above the city of

Portland (American theology) or Pikes Peak over Colorado Springs come to mind. The mountains are present, dominant, undeniable; they are unavoidable but not always consciously acknowledged. There are other mountains—some as high—but none that so dominate the horizon from the city. Some people are inspired by a mountain without ever setting a foot on it. Others are tourists who climb well-worn paths and take in the vistas. Then, there are those who decide to work the mountain. Some stake a claim, extract raw ore, and refine it to arrive at something valuable, and then they discard the dross. Still others use the mountain as a quarry from which they cut blocks and slabs, shape and polish them a bit, and use them pretty much intact. Others, such as civil engineers, grade and shape the mountain to meet some broader purpose, such as flood control, road building, or fire prevention. Then, there are environmental and geological factors at work quite apart from any human activity. Geothermal activity, gigantic plates that press against each other until the land is folded or cracks, and erosion all shape a mountain over the centuries.

Calvin-as-a-mountain suggests that his presence in twentieth-century American theology was undeniable. True enough. Practically speaking, however, he served very different functions for very different ends. For some, the idea of Calvin was what was important; there was very little that was useful for today about what he actually wrote. For others, various mining images seemed to be useful. Separating what was valuable from what was not was the dominant question concerning Calvin's role in the development of American theology. A common image in the literature is one of refining Calvin's thought for the present time. The interesting question, and one that is rarely answered is: what stokes the refiner's fire? In Calvin's case, modernity, orthodoxy, feminism, liberation theology, and ecumenism have all fueled various refining fires to get at what was valuable about Calvin. His thought was so biblical and clear that some theologians treated Calvin as a quarry, cutting slabs of thought and putting them to work in contemporary theological argumentation with just some basic shaping and sanding. Constructive or systematic theologians took a civil engineering approach to Calvin, shaping the mountain to fit larger pictures and discussions. Calvin's doctrines of the Trinity and the church have been particularly useful for ecumenical work. Theologians who glory in Calvin as an ecumenical resource need to be reminded that other theologians have found great wealth in Calvin's unwillingness to depart from the biblical themes that give the Reformed tradition its distinct identity. Similarly, those who glory in Calvin the Reformed theologian often miss natural opportunities he provides to connect to the wider church.<sup>38</sup>

In spite of all the theological work of the twentieth century, Calvin remains. He still dominates the horizon. He has patiently endured a variety of assaults

on his slopes, some friendly and some not. Although theologians and ecclesiastical movements have grown accustomed to the inspiring, hospitable, and malleable character of his writings, history has shown that, 500 years after his birth, Calvin is still capable of pointing to a God who resists all efforts to be domesticated by the church or the academy. Perhaps Mount Hood's neighbor, Mount St. Helens, provides an apt metaphor of the power that can be unleashed when God decides to speak through his gifted and faithful servants.

## NOTES

1. Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), xi. The opening words of William J. Bouwsma's biography of Calvin set the challenge for this chapter in a little more detail than does Partee:

Calvinism has been widely credited—or blamed—for much that is thought to characterize the modern world: for capitalism and modern science, for the discipline and rationalization of the complex societies of the West, for the revolutionary spirit and democracy, for secularization and social activism, for individualism, utilitarianism, and empiricism. What John Calvin thought is by no means necessarily identical with what is meant by the “Calvinism” to which these large consequences have been attributed. He is, nevertheless, implicated in the supposed achievements of the movement that bears his name, if only because of the propensity of many “Calvinists” to invoke the authority of Calvin to legitimate their own ways of life and thought.

William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

2. Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 27.

3. The title of this chapter is an allusion to Alasdair McIntyre's *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

4. George H. Kehm, “What Is Reformed Theology?” *Panorama* [Pittsburgh Theological Seminary] 22, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 22, 7.

5. According to a booklet published by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for the 2009 Calvin anniversary, the three great contributions of Calvin to the modern world are his commitments to the unity of the church, justice, and ending war and violence. One might make the same remark about any number of theologians. Lukas Vischer and Setri Nyomi, *The Legacy of John Calvin: Some Actions for the Church in the 21st Century* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the John Knox International Reformed Center, 2009).

6. Incidentally, the Servetus episode has functioned very similarly to the way “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” continues to plague Jonathan Edwards and his sympathetic interpreters.

7. Henry Christopher McCook, *Historic Decorations of the Pan-Presbyterian Council* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publishing, 1880), 6.

8. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 92ff.
9. Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (New York: Scribner's, 1885).
10. William Walker Rockwell, William Adams Brown, and Thomas Cuming Hall, *Three Addresses Delivered by Professors in Union Theological Seminary: At a Service in Commemoration of the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Calvin, in the Adams Chapel, on Monday Evening, the Third of May, Nineteen Hundred and Nine* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1909).
11. *Ibid.*, 47.
12. B. B. Warfield, "The Present-Day Attitude toward Calvinism: Its Causes and Significance," in B. B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism To-Day* (Edinburgh: Hope Trust, 1909), 21.
13. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1956), 30, 33.
14. Old Princeton Calvinism lived in the second half of the twentieth century in John H. Gerstner and R. C. Sproul, two apologists who invoked Calvin as a proponent of the inerrancy of scripture. Princeton's Edward A. Dowey's most important work, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), marked his long debate with Old Princeton. In the 1960s, Dowey and Gerstner traveled around to local congregations of the Presbyterian Church, debating the Confession of 1967, Dowey defending it, and Gerstner criticizing it.
15. Herman Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace" (1909), trans. Geerhardus Vos, available at [www.contra-mundum.org/books/Calvin.pdf](http://www.contra-mundum.org/books/Calvin.pdf) (accessed October 15, 2008).
16. Cornelius Van Til, "Calvin as a Controversialist," available at [www.the-highway.com/articleAug00.html](http://www.the-highway.com/articleAug00.html) (accessed October 15, 2008). This article was taken from R. C. Sproul, ed., *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976). It originally appeared as chapter 1.
17. Paul Fuhrmann, *God-Centered Religion: An Essay Inspired by Some French and Swiss Protestant Writers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1942), 17.
18. See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper, 1935), 159ff. H. Richard Niebuhr's contributions will be discussed later in the chapter.
19. Joseph Haroutunian, *Wisdom and Folly in Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 89, 110.
20. H. Richard Niebuhr, preface, *ibid.*, viii–ix.
21. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 83.
22. Clarence Bouma, "Calvinism in American Theology Today," *Journal of Religion* 27 (January 1947): 34, 36.
23. Joseph Haroutunian, "Reply to Dr. Bouma: Calvinism Is Not Fundamentalism," *Journal of Religion* 27 (January 1947): 46.
24. Wilhelm Pauck, "The Prospects of Orthodoxy," *Journal of Religion* 27 (January 1947): 50–51.



25. John T. McNeill, "Thirty Years of Calvin Study," *Church History* 17, no. 3 (1948): 208.
26. Fuhrmann, *God-Centered Religion*, 23.
27. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 433.
28. *Ibid.*
29. See J. I. Packer, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 95–114.
30. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).
31. Donald K. McKim released a new edition of a compend with *Calvin's Institutes: Abridged Edition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001).
32. An informative though partisan guide through the complexities of orthodox American Calvinism is found in Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Springfield, Ill.: Good Books, 2003).
33. A good modern example of this kind of polemics is Gary North's work of more than a thousand pages, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996).
34. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, expanded ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1984); and Gary North, *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991). Interestingly, North's argument is that Westminster Seminary's fatal turn came when it embraced Calvin's natural law over Van Til's apologetic starting point.
35. James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1:163, 167. In the 1980s, Brian A. Gerrish, then Gustafson's colleague at Chicago, went to great lengths to establish and document theological development from Calvin to Schleiermacher to Troeltsch as the foundation for a liberal theological program true to Calvin. See, for example, B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
36. The fragment on baptism was published in 1969 and the section on the Lord's Prayer in 1981. Volume I/1 was retranslated and appeared in 1975.
37. See Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), for a helpful guide to the Reformed tradition in a modern American context.
38. For any future attempts at a typology, it is worth noting that the dust jacket to Van Til's *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962) depicts a castle on a piece of mountain hovering in mid-air. This is a visual reference to Van Til's contention that there is no foundation for Barth's theology in spite of its orthodox appearance. The missing epistemological foundation is the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture, something Van Til found in Calvin.