The Reception of Calvin: 
Historical Considerations

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Abstract
The question of the reception of Calvin’s ideas in later Reformed theology requires, first, 
a clear understanding of the various forms of reception. Often historians think of this in 
terms of continuity or discontinuity, but there is a danger that such terms can lead to the 
surreptitious intrusion of anachronistic criteria into the historical task. Instead, the historian 
should set the question of continuity within a broader context, constructed from analysis 
not only of matters of doctrine, but also of philosophical framework, and the specific 
questions to which the texts under consideration were addressed. Then, reception itself 
needs to be understood as a complex matter. There is the reception of specific texts, and the 
reception of particular ideas and concepts. Both are susceptible to their own particular forms 
of historical analysis. The former, being textual and empirical, is relatively easy to assess; 
the latter involves careful attention to communal context, both synchronic and diachronic.
Only as these various issues are addressed will scholarship truly begin to map the complex 
relationship between the theological work of men like Calvin and that of later generations.

Keywords
John Calvin; Reformed Orthodoxy; continuity; covenant; predestination; extra Calvinisticum

In addressing the reception of the thought of John Calvin from a historian’s 
perspective, it is necessary first of all to spend some moments reflecting on 
exactly what it is to which “reception” refers. Such conceptual clarity is an 
important prolegomenon to the work of history proper, lest historical analysis 
be skewed by inappropriate questions or frameworks.

1. Reception of Texts as Historical Actions
The first point to make is that reception is not the same thing either as transla-
tion or mere replication of ideas. Given the status of Latin as the lingua franca 
of the educated classes, vernacular translations give some indication of the
penetration of theology to a more popular audience, but they are no safe guide to reception of texts and ideas, which concept I take to have a twofold reference: first, to the way in which Calvin’s texts were received, used, and transmitted by contemporaries and in subsequent generations; and, second, the way in which his ideas were adopted, adapted, and developed by other thinkers.

In light of this, a further preliminary comment needs to be made, not so much about the reception of Calvin, perhaps, as about the reception of the kind of historical revisions proposed by, among others, Richard Muller and Willem Van Asselt.\(^1\) There has been a tendency to understand the transformation of historical perspectives on Calvin and Reformed Orthodoxy over the last three decades in terms of a “continuity thesis.”\(^2\) This is built on an understanding of the rejection of the historiography of the older scholarship which posited a series of fundamental breaks or discontinuities between the thought of Calvin, or the pre-Tridentine Reformers, and the later, more confessionally articulated theology of the Reformed in the latter part of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Instead, so the argument goes, Muller and company have offered a “continuity thesis” which stresses the continuities between the earlier and later Reformed.\(^3\)

The problem with this understanding of the more recent scholarship is that it fails to address which changes would constitute “continuities” and which “discontinuities” over a given period of time. For example one historian might well regard the differing formulations of the particularity of the atonement in Calvin and, say, John Owen as still standing in continuity with one another; another theologian might see them as opposed, yet both scholars might still agree on the ways in which the latter formulation was a development of the

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2) Numerous students of the sixteenth and seventeenth century have sought to apply the insights of Muller and van Asselt in a manner which emphasizes points of continuity between the Reformation and later Reformed Orthodoxy: see especially the essays in Carl R. Trueman and R.S. Clark, Eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, 1999); Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, Eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, 2001); also Willem J. van Asselt and P.L. Rouwendal, Eds., *Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek* (Zoetermeer, 1998).

other, their opinions of the legitimacy of such a development being a function of their own theological commitments, or even aesthetic tastes. In other words, the “continuity thesis” interpretation or application of the newer scholarship, just like the old “discontinuity thesis,” might still be at root an anachronistic imposition of later doctrinal judgments on historical texts. History serves dogma, as before.

Instead, I would suggest that, rather than being preoccupied with issues of continuity and discontinuity, the newer scholarship represents an attempt to approach the texts as historical actions; and that, as a result, questions of continuity or discontinuity need to be set aside, or at least adopted in a highly qualified form, in the assessment of the reception of theologians such as Calvin by the later tradition.\(^4\)

If texts are considered as actions, then the questions raised by the historian will have to do, first and foremost, with context, as it is context which provides the conventional framework within which actions can be understood. Such context has two aspects: the synchronic and the diachronic, the latter of which is the one to which the “continuity thesis” largely pertains if we wish to retain that model in any form. Cast in this light, the question of reception of Calvin by later generations is not “Does this or that idea, expression, argument, or text stand in continuity with Calvin’s thought?” but rather such as (though not confined to) “Does the reading of Calvin impact the way this writer reads this biblical text?” and “How is this writer using this idea or text of Calvin in his own situation?” To ask these questions is to avoid the questions that drove the older scholarship to its anachronistic, and often dogmatic, conclusions.

2. Questions of Continuity

Given all this, questions of continuity are perhaps best conceived of in three ways. First, there is the straightforward continuity of doctrine upon which all would probably agree. Thus, there is continuity between Calvin and later Orthodoxy on the issue of the hypostatic union of the divine and human in

\(^4\) I am indebted for this insight to the work of Quentin Skinner, the Cambridge historian of political thought. His central methodological contributions in this area can be found in his *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002). While I am unconvinced that it is necessary to use the obfuscatory, if not at times positively Gnostic, jargon associated with speech-act theory, Skinner’s use of the work of philosophers like Austin and Searle is extremely helpful in enabling the historian to think more clearly about the nature and interpretation of historical texts.
Christ. Here, the language used by Calvin, his predecessors, and his successors, enjoys a basic stability and there is little or no question concerning the continuity. In this context, however, it is perhaps better to think of continuity more in terms of confessional and catechetical documents than the writings of individual authors which enjoy no official ecclesiastical status. In other words, the continuity is confessional.5

Second, there is a continuity of philosophical framework. Here, recent scholarship has done a great service by pushing back behind the rhetoric of Calvin and company about scholasticism and Aristotelianism to the way in which he actually related to the wider medieval background, both in terms of its method and its basic philosophical schools. The result has been a picture of Reformation theology in general, and of Calvin in particular, which reveals his underlying debt to ongoing patterns of philosophical and academic discourse which were not as radically transformed by the Reformation as the ecclesiastical crisis would at first seem to imply. This needs to be kept always in mind when assessing the reception of Calvin.6

Third, there is continuity in terms of problems or questions. In this sense, for example, one can argue that the later development of the covenant of redemption is continuous with Calvin, not on the grounds that Calvin held the idea

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5 Given the commitment of both Calvin and later Reformed Orthodox theologians both to the church and to the historic creedal boundaries of the Christian faith, this category would seem to be minimally controversial.

6 Scholarly work in this area is massive, much of it taking its cue from that of Heiko A. Oberman: see his The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought (Edinburgh, 1986); Masters of the Reformation: Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe, trans. Dennis Martin (Cambridge, 1981). On Calvin, Irena Backus has pointed to the Aristotelian underpinnings of aspects of his theology: "Aristotelianism" in Some of Calvin's and Beza's Expository and Exegetical Writings on the Trinity, with Particular Reference to the Terms Ousia and Hypostasis, in Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle (Geneva, 1978). There are two factors here which make problematic any attempts at straightforward arguments about the Reformers' relationship, whether positive or antithetical, to Aristotelianism. First, by the sixteenth century, "Aristotelianism" is an incredibly diverse phenomenon and, by and large, can probably not be used more narrowly than as broadly referring to any system which uses concepts and terminology which derive in some sense from the Aristotelian corpus. Second, the comprehensiveness of the various approaches to reality which can be described as "Aristotelian" meant, in effect, that all thinkers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe were doomed to be "Aristotelians" of some stripe until an equally comprehensive rival could establish itself. This did not happen until the latter part of the seventeenth century, when various patterns of Enlightenment began to reshape the intellectual life of Europe. Indeed, in the case of logic, it was not until Frege, in the late nineteenth century, that Aristotle was finally and definitively dethroned.
in some embryonic or conceptual form which later generations merely made explicit or for which they developed a specific term; rather, it is continuous on the grounds that it addresses, in part, the problems raised by Calvin’s stress upon Christ as mediator according to both natures. The same approach can also be used in terms of the rise of the covenant of works, given the dependence of this structure on notions of Adam’s representative headship of the human race, the impossibility of the finite creature making the infinite Creator a debtor, the rise of linguistic studies relative to the concept of covenant in scripture, etc. Thus, while Calvin does not articulate a covenant of works concept, it can clearly be seen that those who do so stand in continuity with him in terms of the various problems which he faced, and various positions which he did hold. He did not create the covenant of works idea, but he helped feed into the tradition which ultimately produced the concept and the term.

Thus, if continuity is conceived of in these ways, we can avoid the kind of anachronism, or subordination of history to contemporary theological polemic, which is all too tempting for those involved in the task of historical theology.

3. Reception of Specific Texts, and Reception of Ideas and Concepts

In this context, a number of other comments need to be made. We have already noted a distinction within the idea of reception. First, there is reception of specific texts: translations, quotations, and marginal references would qualify as the raw data of such reception. For the historian, such reception is relatively easy to map, given the empirical nature of such. Quotations, marginalia, and attributed allusions all allow the historian to see a point of reception and then to address the matter of how Calvin’s thought or writing are being received at precisely that point. For example, we now know from the recently edited minutes of the Westminster Assembly that Calvin was frequently quoted in the various debates. Influence is thus obvious and direct; and the nature of the reception of his thought and his writings on various points should be a relatively straightforward matter to discern.

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8) There is a fine discussion of precisely this point in Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, 2001), pp. 276–304.
9) See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, 2009), 91–93. For the full Assembly minutes, with analysis, see Chad B. Van
The other type of reception, of ideas and concepts, is far more difficult to analyse; and this is particularly problematic when it comes to Calvin. The main reason for this, of course, is that Calvin’s theology is not original with him but represents rather the expression of a number of traditions which neither originated with him nor were made confessionally normative by him or his writings.

It is worth noting that such reception can only be assessed with any accuracy when the ideas are so unique as to be traceable to a single unique source or where peculiar linguistic forms might be used which seem to originate with Calvin. Such is simply not the case with the vast majority of Calvin’s theology. In this context, we have been ill-served by the term “Calvinism” and its cognates, with its implication of Calvin as having a unique doctrinal status and as having made unique doctrinal contributions; even more so has the identification of the four heads of Dordt as the five points of Calvinism proved a hindrance to understanding Calvin’s place in the intellectual development of Western theology. Indeed, the whole reification of “Calvinism” as a body of doctrine positively and uniquely connected to a single individual is counter-productive to careful historical analysis.

For a start, it is always worth remembering that theology, as a pedagogical discipline, is somewhat communal in nature. Luther is a great example of this: his early interactions with Karlstadt in the revival of Augustine’s thought in the University of Wittenberg, and then his later collaborations with others, especially Melanchthon, all point to the fact that Reformation theology emerged from the communal settings of universities, academies, and churches. The difficulty of isolating the intellectual (as opposed to textual) contribution of one person from another is fraught with difficulties, as demonstrated by the disastrous attempts of the Finnish school of Lutheran studies to set Luther

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10 As one example, Timothy J. Wengert has offered a fine analysis of the Luther-Melanchthon relationship: ‘Melanchthon and Luther/Luther and Melanchthon,’ Lutherjahrbuch 66 (1991), 55–88. We might add that, in real life, the relationship was even more complex than the textual evidence suggests: how many influential conversations were simply never recorded? And how were these two public giants influenced by the myriad other acquaintances and contexts which they shared? The tendency, particularly of intellectual historians, to isolate their chosen subjects from such communal contexts, is most unfortunate and, in debates framed in such terms as ‘Calvin against the Calvinists,’ is clearly detrimental to intelligent and sober historical conclusions.
and Melanchthon at odds with each other on the issue of justification. It is surely the same with Calvin: his colleagues in Geneva, his many correspondents, and the many authors he read all inevitably fed into and shaped his thinking and made his theology something less than a unique contribution. Pardon the pun, but his thinking lacked a certain aseity on all of its major points.

Take, for example, predestination, perhaps the most notorious of Calvin’s teaching in the popular mind. Of course, we all know that Calvin’s teaching in this area was not unique to him but that he stood within an ongoing Western anti-Pelagian tradition which stretched back to Augustine himself. The last half century of scholarship has seen this basic point—that anti-Pelagianism was alive and well throughout the Middle Ages—time and time again. Now, anti-Pelagianism was not monolithic and did contain a certain variety of emphases and even diversity of specific positions, but not even Calvin’s promotion of double predestination was a novel development in his own writings. There are occasional hints of the same in Augustine, and it is certainly to be found in both medieval predecessors such as Thomas Bradwardine and John Wyclif, and in his recent contemporaries, Martin Luther being only the most obvious. Now, in the wake of the Bolsec affair, Calvin’s position was institutionalised and made normative in Geneva and its environs, and thus there is a clear legislative aspect of the reception of Calvin on this point; but on the broader theological plain,


12) See Oberman, Dawn of the Reformation (see above, n. 6); David C. Steinmetz, Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting (Leiden, 1968). In fact, astute historians of doctrine have always seen the anti-Pelagian thrust of much medieval soteriology: see, for example, the old but still remarkably useful monograph by J.B. Mozley, A Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination (London, 1883).

13) As an interesting but relevant aside, the first Prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, William Twisse, was the co-editor, along with Sir Henry Savile, of a republication in 1618 of Thomas Bradwardine’s treatise, De causa Dei contra Pelagium, indicating the self-conscious continuity that the Reformed Orthodox considered themselves to enjoy in relation to their medieval predecessors. Such was not untypical: for example, John Owen made extensive use of Thomas Aquinas on such matters, as well as being a careful reader of contemporary Jansenist texts: see Carl R. Trueman, John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 22–26.
unless a writer specifically cites Calvin as a source, it is impossible to discern influence with any great certainty.

Having said this, it is of course interesting that Calvin, like Luther, uses predestination as a means of securing the believer’s assurance of salvation, not an idea which enjoys significant precedent in the medieval anti-Pelagian tradition. Thus, this raises what one might call a double-reception question: how does Calvin use the medieval heritage for a new pastoral purpose; and then how is the Reformers’ (plural) new use of this received and developed in the subsequent tradition. What problems does the Reformation use raise? What possibilities does it offer in other areas of doctrinal and pastoral concern?

One might also point to the extra Calvinisticum as a possible means whereby reception could be traced. Certainly, the name implies a certain origin in the thought of Calvin; but, of course, the terminology was originally coined by Lutheran polemicists with a vested interest in highlighting the novelty of Calvin’s Christology with reference to his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The fact that one can find similar christological constructs throughout church history, with thinkers such as Athanasius and Aquinas being only the most obvious, points an immediate question mark of how much “extra” was actually involved in the “calvinisticum.” Of course, Calvin’s use of the idea relative to the Lord’s Supper, and his somewhat mystical language regarding union within the context of the sacrament, is perhaps more of a unique contribution; and thus there may be opportunity in the strict area of the use of language and metaphor to see whether, how, and where his forms of expression on this point were received by contemporaries and later generations; but that requires careful parsing both of Calvin’s thought and of the tradition to which he is seen to have contributed.14

4. Conclusion

The relation of Calvin to later Reformed theology is complex, not least because of the models of approach to the question which have been offered in the past. Notions of discontinuity and continuity need to be carefully parsed if they are to be useful in addressing the various questions surrounding this topic and, even then, are only of comparatively limited usefulness.

14 For a fine study of the “extra” in Calvin, see E.D. Willis, Calvin’s Catholic Christology (Leiden, 1966). Willis provides abundant evidence to demonstrate the essential catholicity of Calvin’s position at this point. In the context of this discussion, we might say that this points once again to the confessional continuities within Calvin’s thought.
Further, the myth of Calvin’s originality is also a matter which needs to be overcome. Because Calvin made so little in the way of original theological contribution in terms of raw content, it is very difficult to trace the reception of his thought in any detail among subsequent writers. Where explicit reference is made to texts, where quotations are offered, or where specific arguments are cited, then we have clear evidence with which to work. Beyond that, however, we need to tread carefully in this matter and not to claim reception or influence in any stronger fashion than the very generic nature of much Reformed theological writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will allow us to do.

Still, as a final comment, we should not allow this to disturb us. That Calvin was buried in an unmarked grave tells us much about how he viewed his own significance in the grand scheme of things; and that he was chief prosecutor of Michael Servetus tells us all we need to know about how much Calvin himself valued original and unique contributions to theology in his day.

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