

CALVIN'S CHRISTOLOGY

Stephen Edmondson articulates a coherent Christology from Calvin's commentaries and his *Institutes*. He argues that, through the medium of Scripture's history, Calvin, the biblical humanist, renders a Christology that seeks to capture both the breadth of God's multifaceted grace enacted in history, and the hearts of God's people formed by history. What emerges is a picture of Christ as the Mediator of God's covenant through his threefold office of priest, king and prophet. With Christ's work as the pivot on which Calvin's Christology turns, Christ's person becomes the goal to which it drives: for Christ mediates our union with God only through union with himself. This is the first significant volume to explore Calvin's Christology in several decades. It clarifies an important but perplexing subject in Calvin studies through its focus on Christ's work in history and allows Calvin a voice in the current theological conversation about Christology.

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To my Mother and Father

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction	
The outline of this book	1 7
1 Christ as Mediator	14
Stancaró and the traditional doctrine of the Mediator	16
Calvin's response to Stancaró	28
2 Christ and the covenant history	40
The covenant history	49
Christ in history	69
The Gospel history	79
3 Christ as priest	89
The sacerdotal office in the Gospel commentaries	91
Christ's sacerdotal office in the <i>Institutes</i>	95
4 Christ as king	115
Christ's royal office in the Gospel commentaries	118
Christ's royal office in the <i>Institutes</i>	131
The eternity of Christ's kingdom	143
Christology in the <i>Institutes</i>	151
5 Christ as prophet	154
Christ's prophetic office in the Gospel commentaries	155
Christ's prophetic office in the <i>Institutes</i>	160
Christ as the object of faith	170
6 The person of the Mediator	182
Calvin's use of <i>persona</i>	186
Testimony to Christ's <i>persona</i> in Calvin's commentaries	193
"Hope that God might dwell with us"	201

Conclusion	220
<i>Bibliography</i>	237
<i>Index</i>	244

Preface

If I do not at once begin by stating my reasons for the plan I have adopted in the composition of this Work, it will undoubtedly incur the censures of many . . . [S]ome . . . will think that I have inconsiderately and therefore unnecessarily altered the order which the Holy Spirit himself has prescribed to us. Now, there cannot be a doubt that what was dictated to Moses was excellent in itself, and perfectly adapted for the instruction of the people; but what he delivered in Four Books, it has been my endeavour so to collect and arrange, that it might seem I was trying to improve upon it, which would be an act of audacity akin to sacrilege . . . [But] I have no other intention than, by this arrangement, to assist unpracticed readers, so that they might more easily, more commodiously, and more profitably acquaint themselves with the writings of Moses; and whosoever would benefit from my labours should understand that I would by no means withdraw him from the study of each separate book, but simply direct him by this compendium to a definite object; lest he should, as often happens, be led astray through ignorance of any regular plan.

Preface to the *Commentary on the Last Four Books of Moses*, pp. xiv–xv.

The project of this book is, to some degree, a synthetic one, as I have gathered Calvin's diffuse discussions of the person and work of Christ and organized them under categories that Calvin suggests. This synthetic task is necessary in my endeavor to understand Calvin's Christology, and it evinces the simple reality that any act of understanding is always to some degree an act of accommodation. It is an organization of material in a manner that makes sense to the reader so that some meaning between two parties might be shared. It makes no sense to speak of an unaccommodated understanding of any human being, particularly of a human being with whom we can no longer converse and whose world is separated from ours by four hundred and fifty years. To read carefully, even in the original language, is always already an act of translation. We can distinguish faithful accommodations that are attentive to categories and experiences with

which a writer is working from unfaithful accommodations, but we also might acknowledge, and even celebrate, the possibility of truly productive accommodations that tease out meanings from a text that are not readily apparent on a first reading.

Such accommodations are not claims to understand writers better than they understood themselves, but they do rely on the principle that all of us (or at least those of us who are self-reflective) will understand ourselves better through conversation with those who will make connections between our thoughts and feelings that we never imagined. The synthetic dimension of this project is, I believe, a faithful accommodation of Calvin's work, and it will be productive for the community of Calvin readers. Would it have been productive for Calvin? Would he, at the end of this conversation, have responded: "I never thought of it in that way"? Or would he have replied: "Well, of course, that's what I've been saying all along"? I do not know, but I am convinced that he would have recognized the thinking in this book as his own.

Simply to speak of Calvin's *Christology* is, to some degree, an act of accommodation, insofar as Calvin wrote no independent Christology and, indeed, never used the term "Christology." But to ask about Calvin's Christology is fruitful, insofar as it allows us to achieve a clarity about a topic central to Calvin's thinking, and it is faithful if it does not serve as a Trojan horse, bearing within it a twenty-first-century agenda. I have tried to avoid in this work the mistake of the twentieth-century discussion of the knowledge of God in Calvin – a discussion that was misdirected not in its question, but in its hopes, through this question, to resolve a contemporary debate.

Faithful versus unfaithful accommodation is a matter of agenda, and we must be wary of how subtly our agendas can infiltrate our understanding. It is ironic, for example, that one recent call for faithfulness in our reading of Calvin asks us to eliminate harmonization of Calvin's various expressions of his theological thinking and concern for any systematic unity of his thought or his relevance for the modern theological discussion, as these occlude access to the historical Calvin.¹ Whatever the merits of this methodology as a way of doing history (and I question whether a lack of concern for the internal or external coherence of a subject's thinking serves our understanding of that subject in any substantial way), it begins from an agenda that is distinctly modern and thus imports into our reading of Calvin a set of concerns that Calvin would little recognize.

¹ Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3–17, esp. pp. 6, 10.

Preface

xi

Indeed, when we stand before the diversity of Calvin's theological exposition, we often find ourselves in a position similar to Calvin as he prepared to comment on the last four books of the Pentateuch. We may be convinced that he ordered his teaching in a manner "perfectly adapted for the instruction of the people," but at the same time we feel that we are called to alter this order with the intention "by this arrangement, to assist unpracticed readers, so that they might more easily, more commodiously, and more profitably acquaint themselves" with Calvin's thought. We do this neither to rip Calvin out of his context, nor to deflect our attention from each expression of Calvin's thought in its uniqueness. Rather, we hope through such work to direct readers "to a definite object; lest [they] should, as often happens, be led astray through ignorance of any regular plan." Again, this work focuses more on Calvin than on his context, not to denigrate the importance of that context, but to provide a hypothesis about the nature of Calvin's Christological thinking from which such historical work might proceed.

Acknowledgments

“Acknowledgments” is too slight a term to carry the burden of thanks that I would offer. The projects of our lives are possible, the pains we encounter in them bearable, and the joys that we harvest from them attainable only in the context of the communities of friends and family (and what is the dividing line between these two?) that surround us. This book is the labor of several years, and yet there is a lifetime of gratitude caught up in its production.

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Acknowledgments

xiii

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