Idolaters at Providential Prayer

Calvin’s Praying Through the Divine Governance

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PREFACE

OVER THE PAST FEW decades in particular, there has been an increasing tendency among theologians to ask after what may be called “the religious significance of atheism.” Does atheism have more to say to theology than simply demanding and displaying its utter dissolution? For Paul Ricoeur, among others, “atheism does not exhaust itself in the negation and destruction of religion.” Indeed, he continues, “atheism clears the ground for a new faith, a faith for a postreligious age.”1 What is meant by such a claim? The notion of ground clearing could imply that there is a necessary movement that begins prior to theological reflection. Such a move would, of course, raise all kinds of difficult questions about natural theology. Yet there is way of reading Ricoeur’s assertion here which is more theologically interesting than this. Herein Marx’s notion that religion is the opium of the masses, for instance, would become utilisable by theologians themselves concerned to critique “religion.” Atheism’s protest against suffering, and against the silence of the quiet (quietism) gives a voice to those oppressed by, or at least not-liberated through, religion. This critique would function to hear the silence of the

religiously engaged before the evil against them, and the silence of their “god” that fails to provide them with their flourishing.

What this procedure suggests is that there is an intellectually respectable tendency to theologically criticize what is often taken to be the “classical” notion of God—the God whose liberating possibilities for women, blacks, poor, Jews, and so on, has been curtailed by some sort of idolatrous co-opting. “God-talk” becomes a way of securing the identity and status, in one way or another, of a certain regionalizing of the human. Identifying the source(s) of the idolatry is a complex business and more complex again is determining where the “productive” and “fruitful” imaginings of “God” begin. According to Kathryn Tanner, “a suspicion that Christian beliefs with abhorrent consequences are essentially bound up with all the rest is probably behind a sense that a fundamental reworking of Christian theology is required to avoid them.”

It is in this vein that Thomas Forsyth Torrance’s talk of “Evangelical Calvinism” might be broadly located. To take the terms “Evangelical” and “Calvinism” together in such a fashion may be project-determining, and this very book arises out of just such a vision on the part of the editors. But what kind of work is the phrase doing? To ascertain the type of project-determination it involves depends upon how both terms are framed and how they function to qualify and redirect each other. This, of course, can open the phrase to a plurality of understandings, since there is no consensus on what either term means, never mind how their combination operates. For instance, they can function together as a marker, a group-identifying slogan. My own contribution, in contrast, approaches the intellectual conditioning provided by such a broad description in terms of a mood. “Calvinism” has a particular, historically traceable connection to the theological work of the Reformer John Calvin. How far those successors can trace their intellectual lineage back

2. The link between this type of theism and the assumptions of many philosophers of religion would lead us to echo D. Z. Phillips’ complaint that “Greater damage is often done to religion by those who think of themselves as its philosophical friends, than by those who present themselves as religion’s detractors and despisers” (Phillips, The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God, xi). Similarly, see Funkenstein, Theology and the Scientific Imagination, 8.


4. T. F. Torrance, Scottish Theology, 59–60, 65, 224. Torrance sees himself in line with J. Calvin, J. Knox, and many of the early Scottish theologians, as opposed to Calvinists such as T. Beza, W. Perkins, J. Owen, and J. Edwards.
to Calvin is a matter of dispute, and Torrance himself tends to envisage successive generations of the Reformed traditions as diverging from Calvin in key areas, areas of God, grace, and Gospel. Both Thomas Torrance, and his brother James, write in ways that suggest they are attempting to retrieve Calvin from the Calvinists, especially those of the Scottish Federal traditions. Just how far such a project is sustainable is itself a matter of controversy among the work of theological historians such as Richard Muller. Here the best work of an intellectual historian can provide crucial vigilance that restrains the wildest imaginings of the theologians who frequently display impatience with detail and context. Nonetheless, there is something theologically important going on, and it may well be signaled by Torrance's use of the term “Evangelical.” His theological approach is not that of many who appear to do little more than carry around the bones of the Reformer, attempting to breathe new life into them for each new generation, as if it is only, or at best primarily, through his work that the Gospel is heard (perhaps this could at least partially be described through a term like “Calvinist Evangelicalism”). At worst, the term “Evangelical” functions to reveal a particular way of enclosing the range of theological conversation, and thereby deny certain levels of difficulty and complexity. In this garb, it works to secure a parochial and philistine narrowness of vision. This would entail the reduction of “God” to, in Rowan Williams’ terms, a “tribal fetish.” At best, on the other hand, it can here enable an effort to address “Calvinism” in a way that asks where and how the Gospel might be heard through John Calvin. This project would mean admitting that Calvin was not unsuccessful in fulfilling his dogmatic aim with the Institutes, the aim announced in his prefatory address to King Francis I: “My purpose was to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with

6. See for example Muller, Christ and the Decree.
7. Muller has a point when he suggests that it is better to speak of the “Reformed,” with its sense of diversity, rather than “Calvinist” tradition (Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism," 130).
8. Sung Wook Chung’s rather lightweight collection of essays on Karl Barth largely plays rather singularly and confidently with the term “Evangelical,” failing to be attentive to the wide range of uses and appeals to it in the English-speaking world alone. See Chung, Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology.
any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness.” This approach would implicitly make a judgment on any theological conversations that promote decatholicization by calling them into question as improper limitations on the theological activity of listening to the plenitudinous responses to the “all-embracing magnitude in Christ.”

According to Torrance, when looked at from within a particular light “the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Evangelical Churches are seen to differ, not in their essential relation to Christ, but in the measure in which they have expressed their faith and life in divergent cultural traditions during formative periods in the past have taken up into themselves and sacralised transient forms of life and practice which have come to be regarded as if they belonged to the enduring form of the Church as the Body of Christ in history.” The suggestion here is that no feature of the Christian tradition is safe from interrogation, whether that be the Orthodox, Roman Catholic or even (I say “even” since it was Torrance’s own) Evangelical, and within that Reformed, tradition. Of course, such an asketical attempt is fraught with peril, and Torrance recognizes that there is a real and affecting difficulty: “There are of course psychological difficulties to be overcome, notably the power upon us of habits in understanding and interpretation slanted by an ecclesiastico-cultural tradition which can prevent us from appreciating another or a fresh formulation of doctrine and can thus hinder reconciliation.” To put this another way, there are dangers of failing to identify the very contexts that shape one’s very response to any theological work; and thus of imposing a theological framework upon a particular theologian in such a way that his/her voice is denied its particularity; and, finally, of being loose and free with the very contexts that are constitutive of a good understanding of the theologian’s work. The point that Torrance would make, though, is that such an interrogatory process is necessary. It is so for the critical re-examination of “the connections between historical

11. T.F. Torrance, Theology in Reconciliation, 15.
12. Ibid., 8.
13. For a critique of the Church of Scotland as succumbing to the power of tradition over against scripture, see T. F. Torrance, Theology in Reconstruction, 164–65. “There is scarcely a Church that claims to be ecclesia reformata that can truthfully claim to be semper reformanda” (ibid., 165).
theology and the cultural environment of the Church, in order to lay bare the core of basic beliefs and doctrines at the centre of the Church's faith and distinguish it from the body of secondary concepts and relations which may well have served an important purpose in the past at some critical juncture in the history of the Church but which in the last analysis have only a peripheral significance so far as the substance of the faith is concerned. While this use of positioning language ("core," "basic," "centre," "substance," "secondary," "peripheral," "substance") may itself look intellectually quaint and constraining to any contemporary post-foundationalist theological imagination weaned on the mood of philosophical "instability" and fluid forms of doctrinal interrelations, the broad point is well taken. Theology in every context engages in an attempt to hear and follow the Gospel, while hoping to properly identify the ways in which the proclamation of that Gospel unwittingly serve to distort it. The work of theology "will enable us to discern how far what we thought to be sacrosanct patterns of formulation were determined by obsolete notions of philosophy and science; this would have the effect of liberating us from their control, and it would help us also to reformulate our understanding of the faith in a more open dialogue with the advance of human culture in which current forms of thought and speech may be adapted to the service of the Gospel without the Gospel being tied down to what may prove once again to be of only transient significance." This might be well articulated in terms that permit the radicality of Torrance's claim to be rhetorically foremost: good critical theological work would help liberate us from patterns of distortion that call themselves "Christian" (what Torrance refers to with the unhappy phrase "transient significance"), and would redirect us to the healing and reconciling work of God that constitutes the ground of human flourishing (what Torrance refers to with the equally unhappy concept of permanent Gospel substance).

Charles Wood laments "the damage that unexamined doctrine can do", and he highlights "the urgent need for doctrine that has been tested and refashioned ... to furnish adequate guidance to and for Christian life." Such a mood directs this chapter's contribution to the book collection. The broad theological concern that it emerges from has to do with

15. Ibid., 8–9.
16. Ibid., 10–11.
the nature and substance of prayer in Christian life and practice. But to even begin to attempt to make such theological observations some substantive dogmatic work needs to be done, and Calvin's doctrine of providence is selected as the chapter's primary focus. 18

PRAYER AND DIVINE AGENCY: BELIEF IN, AND PRACTICES OF, THE GOD AND THE GODS

The relation between critical reflection on prayer and the intellectual work of Christian dogmatics may not be entirely clear in an ecclesiastical environment that has come to bifurcate intellectual work and practical performance, thought and practice. Beliefs have become, claims L. Gregory Jones, largely "disembodied convictions." 19 Before moving on to the dogmatic issue it is worth spending a little time reflecting on what it is that is being done here.

Terry Eagleton has claimed that the study of "ideology" is made difficult by virtue of the fact that ideologies are often associated with what others have and do. 20 What Eagleton claims about "ideology" is appropriate for critical theological considerations of what in theological terms is known as "idolatry." Idolatry tends to be a concept used to judge what others do, and thus it commonly functions as a rhetorically loaded insult in theological polemics in much the same way as "heresy" does. The way that Jean Cauvin, or John Calvin, has construed the crucial issue of idolatry and iconoclasm in the 1559 edition of The Institutes of Christian Religion could conceivably lend itself to such a perspective. While many may find reasonably innocuous the notion that idolatry involves the

18. Scholarly attention has generally been paid to Calvin's account of predestination, but as Paul Helm rightly observes, "for Calvin predestination is one aspect of providence, that aspect of God's governance of all things that concerns the destiny of the elect and of the reprobate" (Helm, John Calvin's Ideas, 96). That means, among other things, that concerns over Calvin's account of predestination can be directed well into his discussion of providence as the soteriological end of his account of God's sovereign agency over and for the creature. Cf. Muller, Christ and the Decree, 19. It can also shed light on "why Calvin placed his discussion of providence in book i and his discussion of predestination in book iii in the final edition of the Institutes" (Helm, John Calvin's Ideas, 97–98). In editions of the Institutes earlier than 1559 both providence and predestination were bound together architecturally. On the other hand Muller claims that when Calvin spoke of the two together, providence serves predestination. Muller, Christ and the Decree, 23.


inappropriate materialization of God, and thus a denial God's glorious difference from creatures, Calvin more controversially conceives of this primarily in terms of the liturgical and doxological practices of the Roman Catholic Church. 21 And yet his account of sin pulls somewhat in the opposite direction. He claims to be writing his Institutes to provide a manual of instruction to the Reformed churches that, on the grounds of their supposed hearing the Gospel, oppose Roman Catholicism as failing to bear the marks of Christ's Church. In this context one might well expect a perspective characterized by a "righteous-us" against an "unrighteous-them." But Calvin does not offer this for either the Reformed churches or for himself as a teacher within them, or at least he does not at this point in his work. 22 Instead, and somewhat surprisingly, he offers an account of the post-lapsarian condition as necessarily and universally involving sin as labyrinthine, 23 a blindness, and the mind as a veritable "factory of idols." 24 No distinction is made here between sinners qua sinners, and consequently, at least in theory, Calvin is bound by a sensibility marked by the fragility and provisionality of theological performance. In other words, he is not here allowing for a Donatist-style evasion of the appeal to sinfulness, even blindness, for Christian churches. 25 In this context, then, theology becomes training in constancy of vigilance, a perennial iconoclastic watchfulness. In other words, theology involves doctrinal therapy or training in how not to speak nonsense. Calvin certainly senses considerable theological nonsense around about him. To Cardinal Sadoletto he complains in a manner not unlike certain forms of Northern European Humanism, "Among the people themselves, the highest veneration paid to thy Word was to revere it at a distance, as a thing inaccessible, and abstain from all inves-


22. Just how far Calvin was successful in this regard is itself contested. Roland Boer's book, for instance, regards Calvin as one whose "radical possibilities" were constrained by his "innate conservatism" (Boer, Political Grace xv).

23. Calvin, Inst., 1.5.12.

24. Ibid., 1.11.9.

25. Of course, to speak of Calvin's position as one involving the post-lapsarian condition as one of "total depravity" is somewhat misleading, especially when that is understood in terms of being an anthropological pessimism. See Calvin, Inst., 2.2.16; T. F. Torrance, Calvin's Doctrine of Man, 84; Charry, By the Renewing of Your Minds, 207; Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 73.
tigation of it. During this supine state of the pastors, and this stupidity of the people, every place was filled with pernicious errors, falsehoods and superstition."26 Sounding much like Gregory the Theologian, Calvin announces that "nothing is more contrary to reverence for God than the levity that marks an excess of frivolity utterly devoid of awe."27 This talk is inappropriate, misdirected, distorting, in a word idolatrous because it is not conducted with the due reverence to God's givingness that God-talk requires. The Reformer continues to Sadoletto, "the rudiments in which I had been instructed were of a kind which could neither properly train me for legitimate worship of the Deity, nor train me aright for the duties of the Christian life."28 After all, as Calvin famously argues in the 1559 edition of the Institutes, the knowledge of God and knowledge of human being are bound up together,29 thus suggesting that idolatry is something that involves a fundamental distortion at the very level of being "human." To his mind the formative ecclesial contexts of the time are not offering pedagogies in discipleship at all, but formations in idolatries instead. His conscious task is to help make contexts and communities in which the asketic dissolves the grip on the imagination of the false gods, and he intends to offer schools for discipleship in hearing God, through learning to read the Scriptures well, through reasoning through them together, and through perceiving the divine glory throughout the world. Geneva was to provide the best model that was practically possible of this learning-to-unlearn-in-order-to-learn (and here Calvin's occasional reticence to make grand claims about the success is a noteworthy tempering of any enthusiastic hyperbole over what is achieved by the Genevan Church efforts in this regard).30

This prolonged introductory material might seem like an odd way to move into a chapter broadly interested in prayer. However, the connection between prayer, theology, and idolatry (or even ideology) is a key one. Prayer is claimed by its practitioners (at least if we are speaking of prayer in the so-called "Abrahamic traditions") to be prayer to

30. Although to Sadoletto Calvin is highly positive about the piety of the Reformed Church (Calvin, "Reply to Sadoletto," Hillerbrand (ed.), 167). See Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor and Theologian, 12.
God. Even if one takes seriously Ludwig’s Feuerbach’s critical reading that prayer is really offered “to” what one most values, and thus to an (unhealthy) expression of the alienated self, the proximity between that and Luther’s description of a “god” is sufficient to maintain that there are theological reasons for critical reflection on practices of prayer: “A God is that to which we look for all good and where we report for help in every time of need. To have a God is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart. . . . The confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. . . . Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.” That is not to say that other disciplines do not have an important role to play—after all, prayer is an act of persons with histories, of persons who pray in ways that express their desires and self-understandings. The help that non-theological accounts can provide become less helpful when they simply take the place of theological description, reducing prayer always and everywhere to practices of auto-suggestion, therapy for the soul, healing for the self, and so on. The direction of this communicative activity, as was common to early psychologists of religion, is simply an incurved one. The question of what prayer appropriately is has to do with the nature of the One prayed to, and this constitutes it as a theological question. If prayer is offered to an idol then the engagement in prayer itself will be distorted—either in the sense that it is “prayer” misdirected to that which is not “God” or that it is the character and desires of the pray-er that are deformed. And this set of theological interrogations is made all the more pressing by virtue of the fact that prayer involves a set of practices over which there is little consensus or consistency. Theological reflection becomes a critical moment in the regular operation of Christian practices, uncovering and interrogating the commitments that ground these and that educate our desires.

GOD’S GRIEVING OVER CALVIN’S PRAYER

In recent years Calvin’s account of prayer has been subjected to the kind of intense criticism that suggests that the Gospel is insufficiently sounded through it. One such set of criticisms has emerged from the work of those who are collectively referred to as “Open Theists,” and from those

31. See Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, ch. XII.
32. Luther, Large Catechism, 44.
who are broadly sympathetic with its theological mood. The following section does not claim that the critical readings of Calvin, by most notably John Sanders, are eminently intellectually sophisticated, particularly well-argued, or sufficiently detailed. Nor does it suggest that readings of Calvin as a "causal determinist" are new with Sanders. Rather, the use of Sanders does at least two broad jobs: it indicates that serious worries about Calvin's theological sensibility continue unabated, and it reflects a critique that expresses an intense area of controversy in contemporary Evangelicalism.

Nevertheless, it is not terribly theologically interesting to consider the near hysteria that Open Theism has provoked among many Evangelicals, especially in North America, with unhelpfully wild and loose accusations of "heresy" in tow.33 Even so, this may say much for, firstly, the condition that much Evangelicalism finds itself in—it is frequently unable to expend appropriate time and energy on nourishingly listening to the concerns of others in their theological critiques. Secondly, it can indicate that certain prominent forms of Evangelicalism are more concerned with intra-Evangelical disputes (given that Open Theism tends to provoke little attention from non-Evangelical theologies) than with broader theological consideration and conversation. What is interesting, however, theologically speaking, is the concept of "Classical Theism" that the Openness theologians set their faces against, as if the entirety of theological history could be flattened and homogenized in such a fashion. The worry of these thinkers is that theology has demonstrated itself to be insufficiently shaped by the biblical witness to God as its generative and determinative witness. Instead, they attempt, rather heavy-handedly it must be admitted, to identify the problems of Western theological culture (e.g., atheism)34 with the metaphysical intrusion of Greek philosophical sensibilities and categories of thought.35 Open Theism involves, among other things, an iconoclastic reorienta-

33. For instance, see Geisler, Creating God in the Image of Man?
34. See Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 2.
35. See Sanders, "Historical Consideration," 59–98; Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, ch. 2. There is plenty of precedent for such an approach, from the Protestant Reformers who went behind what they considered as the intrusion of idolatries in the development of the Roman Catholic Church to a "pure" apostolic faith; to the nineteenth-century liberal theologians, whose project attempted to purge perceived Hellenism that has distorted the Christian message by uncovering the essence that is the Jesus of history.
tion of the question of the divine’s world-involvement in order to redirect Christian living into healthier forms.\textsuperscript{36}

Sanders is convinced that the depiction of God in Jesus Christ is central to the most coherent and truthful account of perception of providence and the life of prayer that can be offered. So Sanders argues that the doctrine of providence “refers to the way God has chosen to relate to us and provide for our well-being.”\textsuperscript{37} That reference to God’s action provides the ground for appropriate reflection on the shape of the reconciled life or of the formation appropriate to the making of persons as Christians. So, he declares, “The stance we take regarding divine providence has profound implications for what we believe about evil, salvation, worship, prayer, following God’s will, caring for the environment and helping the poor.”\textsuperscript{38}

Accordingly, Sanders attempts to demonstrate what that depiction provides for understanding the specific kinds of activities that are appropriate and necessary for the formation of practices of prayer and of the perception of the effects of prayer in the world. Those all involve for him an account of God’s relation to the world that entails talk of divine “risk.” “Risk” has to do with the following for Sanders: a sovereignly freely decided Self-disposing or restraining of the exercise of “meticulous control” or “exhaustive divine control,”\textsuperscript{39} a consequent “openness” “to what creatures do,” the affect creatures have upon God and the contingent direction of God’s governance in and through that genuine and dynamic interactivity with creaturely agency,\textsuperscript{40} and a risk or self-chosen vulnerability in creating indeterminately free creatures who may sinfully refuse to co-operate appropriately with the reciprocal relations of God’s

36. Arguably, Open Theism is as much a reaction to what is perceived to be “Classical Theism” as it is a fusion of theological metaphysics with a Hegelian “game engine,” producing a “panentheistic” engagement with divine-creaturely relations. See McCormack, “The Actuality of God,” 190, 199. Cf. Pinnock: “Let us seek a way to revise classical theism in a dynamic direction without falling into process theology” (Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 107).

37. Sanders, The God Who Risks, 12. Language of “choice” here needs to be used with caution. It functions to indicate the contingency of the forms of media of God’s Self-presencing, but it must be careful not to loosen the trinitarian nature and shape of the act of revelation, as if God’s act through the Logos was itself contingent, freely “chosen.” See T. F. Torrance, Reality and Evangelical Theology, 23.


39. Ibid., 14, 43. Even so, does it not remain a matter of divine control if providence is more “general” than “meticulous”?

40. Ibid., 14.
purposes of love. In this scheme, prayer becomes a dialogical or collaborative event in which pray-ers can act (an asking) and God can react (a responding).

It is not my purpose to spend much time theologically critiquing this perspective, or at least not directly. Yet it is worth noting that the accusation that the tradition has been susceptible to a distorting intrusion of alien thinking (Hellenistic in this context) can potentially be turned around on its head. It can be asked whether the Open Theists themselves been susceptible to a distorting intrusion of alien thinking (post-Hege­lian process philosophies). It is a considerable intellectual job to assess such a question, but no swift and careless use of historically light work can sustain the need for deep reflection and conversation between these various theological traditions. Moreover, the appeal to biblical texts by the various “positions” has the tendency to undermine the exercise of deep reasoning and fruitful forms of conversation. Finally, it is arguable that the appeal to divine affectivity and dependence as a response to “classical” divine apathy may not only misread how apatheia functions within the traditions but simultaneously demonstrates that it itself is determined by modern cultural connecting of selfhood with affectivity.

My concern, instead, is with Calvin, and in Sanders’ assessment Calvin’s theological work fairs badly. The sixteenth century Reformer’s thinking is supposedly irretrievably blighted by the distinctly problematic theological context in which it is constituted, shaped and which it consequently expresses. However, if Sanders’ criticisms are misplaced recognizing this may well indicate some concerning features of his own theological proposals: among other things, at the very least it could indicate a careless handling of texts of “Classical Theism,” something which demonstrates that his theology is not taking place in and through the best and most attentive kinds of theological conversation; and it may well even indicate crucial points of vulnerability with his theological work that could potentially open up certain avenues for critique of Sanders’ project. On the other hand, if Sanders’ concerns are even broadly well-placed then there arises the demand for reflecting again

41. Ibid., 39.

42. Is it obviously the case that “love” qua love involves vulnerability, dependency, and affectivity? If love is gratuity then in God’s case pure gratuity involves the giving for the sake of the well-being of another, and concepts of divine dependency and reciprocity become considerably more complicated.
on what provides, in John Webster's words, an appropriate "conceptual schema for identifying the identity of God of the Christian confession."\textsuperscript{43}

Sanders' critical reading of Calvin takes several forms. The first is biblical, although, in fact, arguably it is evident in practice that Sanders materially privileges Old Testament texts. For Calvin, the references to God experiencing emotions (like grief), or changing God's mind are to be understood as the divine \textit{attemperatio} (accommodation) to our understanding, anthropomorphisms that tell us something about, for instance, God's attitude to sin.\textsuperscript{44} According to Sanders, any claim in this regard requires a hermeneutic that enables the reader to perceive anthropomorphism because it has criteria developed from other texts. "Unfortunately, Calvin does not disclose how he decides which biblical tests go into which category."\textsuperscript{45} At this point, Sanders urges caution "so that we do not allow our preconceived notions of divinity to run roughshod over biblical teaching." His appeal is instead "to take the anthropomorphic language of Scripture seriously."\textsuperscript{46} This, however, is a misleading rhetorical claim since figurative and metaphorical readings of texts are precisely themselves attempts to take equally \textit{particular} texts seriously. More significant is the claim that Calvin uses "philosophical reasoning to argue that it is not "proper," for a deity to change his mind. . . . Calvin's hermeneutic presupposes that sovereignty means domination, and so biblical texts that go against this understanding are read differently."\textsuperscript{47} Again, it could be asked whether Sanders' approach is not doing something similar: locating the "strong" or "control" texts in and from a modern account of relations predicated in terms of reciprocity, and love in terms of vulnerability.\textsuperscript{48} "My principle argument against exhaustive sovereignty is that it rules out certain experiences, decisions and actions that the Bible and many theists attribute to God. For instance, the biblical portrait depicts God as being grieved (Gen 6:6), changing

\textsuperscript{43} Webster, "Life in and of Himself," 107.

\textsuperscript{44} See Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the First Book of Moses}, 1.248-249; Calvin, \textit{Inst.}, 1.17.12-14. According to Calvin, it is inappropriate to describe God as changing God's mind or grieving since that would suggest "either that he is ignorant of what is going to happen, or cannot escape it, or hastily and rashly rushes into a decision" (ibid., 1.17.12).

\textsuperscript{45} Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 30.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 73-74, 157-58.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 179: "love is vulnerable, since lovers grant the beloved a power over themselves." Cf. Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," 198.
his mind (Ex 32:14), resorting to alternate plans (Ex 4:14), being open and responsive to what the creatures do (Jer 18:6–10), being surprised at what people have done (Jer 3:7; 32:35). God sometimes makes himself dependent on our prayers (Jas 4:2)."

The second main criticism Sanders levels at Calvin traces a connection between the latter’s supposed philosophical presuppositions and his distortion of the Scriptures. This criticism has to do with perceived constraints on the nature of human freedom in an account of divine sovereignty that understands providence as control, meticulous or “exhaustive control over absolutely everything.”

“[L]ike Augustine and Aquinas, he understood God’s knowledge and will to be absolutely independent of the creation. God does not look ahead and see what is going to happen, for that would make God dependent on what the creatures decide. God does not decide what he will do in response to anything the creatures do. All that God knows and wills is not in relation to the creation but simply in relation to his own will. This effectively denies any sort of mutual relationship between God and his creatures.”

What makes this a theological loss as far as Sanders is concerned? “From the perspective of a free will theist”, and by this Sanders means one committed to a strong indeterminist or “libertarian” view of creaturely freedom, “the “conversation” an omnidetermining deity has with humans is more like that between a ventriloquist and a dummy or a programmer and a robot.” This, he maintains, is not the freedom granted “as a necessary component to make relations of love possible.”

The third criticism involves a dogmatic worry about the relation of the providential divine determination and human sinning. “If God

50. Ibid., 157.
51. Ibid., 156.
52. Ibid., 236.
53. Ibid., 227.
54. Ibid., 236. Pinnock reveals the dualistic thinking prevalent among Open Theists: “God does not monopolize the power. This means that God is a superior power who does not cling to his right to dominate and control but who voluntarily gives creatures room to flourish. By inviting them to have dominion over the world [for example], God willingly surrenders power and makes possible a partnership with the creature” (Sanders, “Systematic Theology,” 113). Sanders’ talk of divine “openness” is defined by the wrong kind of theological emphasis: “God is open to what creatures do” [14] should be theologically reordered at least to read “God is open to the giving of the divine communal embrace, as manifest in creating, reconciling and redeeming.”
always gets precisely what he desires in each and every situation, then it is incoherent to speak of God's being grieved about or responding to the human situation. . . . God's will is never thwarted in any respect.  

This generates a problem for understanding sin—it cannot but be caused by God, and thus be a matter of God's will. "If God grieves, then there is at least one respect in which God intends the world to be different than it is. To affirm that God grieves is to deny meticulous providence. Either the world is exactly the way God intends or it is not. If God grieves because it is not as he intends, then God is not determining all events."  

In this regard, Sanders tackles various attempts to resist this conclusion from the "meticulous providence" perspective, for instance the notion that God is the "remote cause" and we are the "proximate cause"; thereby denying God as the author of sin. Appeal is sometimes made in this context to the notion of divine "permission," and yet Calvin critically adjudged just such an appeal as improperly rendering God something of a passive spectator. However, both this and Calvin's argument concerning double causality are identified as being insufficient since, Sanders continues, "According to specific sovereignty, everything that occurs is precisely what God meticulously controls to occur." So Calvin admits that God wills the Fall of Adam, the reason for which lies hidden in God's eternal counsel but through which "from man's Fall he might gather occasion for his own glory."  

Sanders criticizes the glib notion that wickedness is the occasion for human spiritual development and growth, or belongs to the "best of all possible worlds," by claiming several concerns, three of which are worth articulating here. Firstly, "many people do not experience such growth. They become embittered or overwhelmed, thus casting doubt on God's ability to teach." Secondly, "the inequitable distribution of suffering is disproportionate to the needs of the learners." Thirdly, the defense that appeals to divine inscrutability is turned on its head: "it leads to a vacuous understanding of morality, since we no longer know 

56. Ibid., 235.  
what divine morality is. God becomes inscrutable, which leads to a resignation and a denial of evil.”

The fourth criticism of Calvin has to do with what happens to prayer. “The God of meticulous providence does not and cannot respond to prayers.”62 Any talk of God’s “answering” prayer can only, he advises, be understood in the following manner: “God, who ordained the specific request by that particular petitioner, ordained that the “answer” to the prayer would follow the ordained prayer. . . . If God determines everything, including our prayers, then God could only “respond” to his own ordained decisions.”63 This option is, of course, fundamentally denied by Sanders’ dialogical understanding in which “Our prayers make a difference to God because of the personal relationship God enters into with us.”64 Nonetheless, intriguingly Sanders detects a different voice in Calvin, one that pulls in what the Open Theists consider to be a more satisfactory direction: “when he discusses the nature and value of prayer he speaks . . . as though God does, in fact, respond to our prayers, is receptive and enters into reciprocal relationships with his creatures.”65 A good example of this is when Calvin claims that God “is ready to hear our prayers; and above all that he is spontaneously ready to come to our help.”66

DEMYSTIFYING THE “SECRET” THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD INVOLVES FOR PRAY-ERS?

Calvin’s account of prayer in his manual for reading Scripture, the 1559 edition of the Institutes, is located in his discussion of theological education, or the provision of God for our beneficial receipt of the grace of God. Thus it belongs to the point at which, T.H.L. Parker claims, “the Institutio reaches its climax”,67 and its title impresses the importance of the lengthy discussion: “Prayer, Which is the Chief Exercise of Faith,

62. Ibid., 278.
63. Ibid., 278f.
64. Ibid., 280. The scholarship of Terrence Fretheim and Samuel E. Balentine are utilized substantially to aid Sanders in his reading of this in the Old Testament. Fretheim, “Prayer in the Old Testament;” Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible.
67. Parker, Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought, 107.
by Which We Daily Receive God's Benefits." This designation sounds potentially like it offers the sort of reciprocity that Sanders desires and occasionally finds lurking in Calvin's work, especially in his preaching and commentaries. But Calvin's account is more like a kind of God-given spiritual therapy for piety, a reorienting of the pray-er's desires. Prayer is given for our sake and not for God's. It adds nothing to God, does not affect God's redemptive will and the righteousness of God's judgments, and does not change the divine constancy or faithfulness to the engracing of the creature. In a section explaining why this does not make prayer superfluous Calvin says that it has been ordained "not so much for his [viz., God's] own sake as for ours." However, does language of "not so much for his own sake" not suggest a theological pattern in which God is considered to gain something from it? This is the kind of text that Sanders would conceive of as revealing a tension in Calvin's work on prayer, with his own un-Calvin-like reorientation of the tension in the direction of reciprocal relationality. Has Calvin not opened the way for an account in which prayer does affect God, even if that is only its secondary purpose? Certainly for Calvin, all God's acts are with a view to the glorification of God, and this claim sounds like "all for God's sake and not for ours." What does this mean, though, other than that God acts in order to display God's saving mercy and justice and that those are for the sake of the creature? That, then, in one sense would turn the claim into "not at all for God's sake (since God does not gain anything) but for ours," and in another "not so much for God's sake (since God gains nothing other than to act graciously ad extra) as for

68. A similar claim is made by Selderhuis, Calvin's Theology of the Psalms, 224–26; and Ware, "The Role of Prayer and the Word in the Christian Life According to John Calvin," 90, cited in Calhoun, "Prayer: 'The Chief Exercise of Faith," 352. See, for instance, Calvin's comment on Deuteronomy 9:13–14: God "does so bind himself to our praying and supplications, that they be as it were restraints of his wrath: so that whereas diverse times he would destroy all, he is as it were changed, if we come and humble ourselves before him" (Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomy, 394).

69. Calvin, Inst., 3.20.3, my emphasis.

70. According to David Crump, "any apparently imperative effects are merely illusory misinterpretations of providence" (Crump, Knocking on Heaven's Door, 297). David B. Calhoun, in contrast, claims that "Neither in the Institutes nor elsewhere in his writings does Calvin assert that prayer is not at all for God's own sake, but only for ours" (Calhoun, "Prayer," 350). And he cites Selderhuis who claims that "prayer is not so much about moving God to a responsive action as it is given to bring a believer to greater confidence" (ibid., 226).
ours (for whom God acts graciously).” This is clear from the discussion in the section on “Objection: Is Prayer Not Superfluous? Six Reasons for It.” So Calvin elucidates, “Now he wills—as is right—that his due be rendered to him, in the recognition that everything men desire and account conducive to their own profit comes from him, and in the attestation of this by prayers.” That sounds like the claim that “God glorifies” God’s Self in and through all things; and significantly it does not have to do with the kind of affective notion of reciprocity that Sanders hopes to claim from Calvin at his perceived best. The glorifying Self-expression of the Creator through the creature, as a reflection of the divine creativity, is quite different in scope and nature from the claim that God is affected and moved from without. The former is God’s own act, while the latter makes God passive at a crucial point (even if that passivity is chosen by God, as Sanders maintains).  

Calvin speaks in a way that reorients the sense of divine Self-glorification: “But the profit of this sacrifice also, by which he is worshiped, returns to us.” In this context, the concept of “sacrifice” carries with it a sense of prayer as a form of self-giving, even a giving up or giving away (carefully constrained, however, lest the creature lose the integrity of its existence). The crucial part, however, is the claim that the “sacrificial” work of prayer in response to God’s having profited the creature “returns to us,” or profits us further. “[T]hrough it [viz. prayer] our hearts are trained to call upon God’s name.” Calvin’s account is firmly wedded to a particular asymmetrical understanding of divine action. His is an account of providence in which God is provider and creatures (calling on God) are dependent. In prayer, or in what is properly called “prayer,” “we give ourselves over to his care, and entrust ourselves to his providence.” That is how prayer for God’s will to be done is best understood. It is less an admission that God’s will is not being done (although, as we will see later, there is a real sense in which Calvin can speak of God’s disapproval and of sin as an attack on God’s will) than a moment of commitment to the doing of God’s will. Illuminatingly, Calvin follows the statement “not so much for his [viz., God’s] own sake as for ours” with six reasons for prayer, none of which provide the kind of panentheistic reciprocity of divine-human relations that Sanders desires: to make

73. Ibid., 3.20.44.
us zealous in love; purification of our desires from sinfulness; to prepare to receive God's benefits; to meditate on God's kindness; to delight more in God's provision; and, finally, to trust in God's providence.²⁴

This is all relatively familiar and hardly, at least with this description, offers a reading that responds either to Sanders' critique or theological apprehension over so-called "classical theism." Moreover, it has not yet dealt with what Calvin is doing with a claim such as God "sometimes even helps us unasked," implying that more often than not God helps us when asked.²⁵ Yet three crucial factors that considerably complicate Sanders' reading of Calvin need to be recognized. These importantly free the reader of Calvin up for deeper theological wrestling with his material.

The first thing has to do with how the doctrine of providence is handled in an appreciably modest manner in Calvin, and what makes this observation theologically interesting is the fact that it appears to pull in a different direction from the strongly determinist reading of Calvin. As Williams argues, "there is an aspect of dogmatic utterance that has to do with making it harder to speak of God."²⁶ The matter pivots on the issue of what the doctrine of providence is trying to do. For Calvin it is not an attempt to answer any question of how God is present, but rather delineates the nature of the gratuitousness constancy of divine care, or God's faithfulness with the product of God's "hands" in order to shape the faith of Christian communities or, to adapt Wood's terms, to form a pedagogical instrument "for the cultivation of wisdom."²⁷ Calvin's theological "instruction manual," Institutes of the Christian Religion, is written for communities of Reformed Christians who are being persecuted by particular political and ecclesial authorities that, he believes, no longer perceptibly display the marks of the Church under God's grace. These Reformed congregations are not only suffering but they are urged to resist the temptations of falsehood and idolatry, in order to better reflect the truth of the Gospel. Calvin, in other words, is aware of the precarious and utterly contingent character of human life, and in this regard his approach is not that of Job's friends who perceived an equitable order whereby justice is seen to punish the wicked and prosper the

²⁴. Ibid., 3.20.3.
²⁵. Ibid.
²⁶. Williams, On Christian Theology, 84.
good.\textsuperscript{78} In contrast to them, the Reformer maintains, in an exposition of \textit{Psalm} 73:20, that "in this world the wicked abound in riches and power and this confusion, which is, as it were, a dark night, will continue until God shall raise the dead."\textsuperscript{79} The Fall is identified with disorder, Adam's rebellion being "the subversion of all equity and well-constituted order."\textsuperscript{80} Thus, as Timothy George argues, "Calvin's doctrine of providence did not reflect the pious optimism of "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." It arose from an utterly realistic assessment of the vicissitudes of life and of the anxiety they produce."\textsuperscript{81} Calvin, therefore, observes that "Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable too the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases."\textsuperscript{82}

The doctrine of providence can not, then, be an empirically grounded affair, whether (to draw in later theological debates) grounded in the supposed patterns of nature or progressions of history or the affectations of pious experience. Rather, it is a statement of faith in the God who is constant and faithful to creation. In fact, according to Wilhelm Niesel, for Calvin "only believers have eyes to trace the workings of divine providence."\textsuperscript{83}

In the context of a persecuted church, the doctrine, properly articulated, functions as something of an encouragement to believe counterfactually, or believe against appearances. Believers are exhorted to cling to God's promises. It is this that drives Calvin's insistence on God's care for every event. Not only is he attempting to articulate a specific doctrine of God as sovereign, but he is doing so in a way that refuses to cut any aspect of God's works and their agencies off from the divine care. Given

\textsuperscript{78} Susan Schreiner provides a good description of Calvin's reflections on, and struggles with, the book of \textit{Job} in Schreiner, "Calvin as an Interpreter of Job," 53–84. She notes that Job's friends develop theologically some of Calvin's favored themes in his account of providence, and simultaneously that Calvin was not particularly fond of Job himself.

\textsuperscript{79} Cited in Schreiner, \textit{The Theater of His Glory}, 33.

\textsuperscript{80} Calvin, \textit{Commentary on Genesis} 3:1, cited in Schreiner, \textit{The Theater of His Glory}, 28.

\textsuperscript{81} George, \textit{The Theology of the Reformers}, 205.

\textsuperscript{82} Calvin, \textit{Inst.}, 1.17.10.

\textsuperscript{83} Niesel, \textit{The Theology of John Calvin}, 72. Niesel warns against interpreting this statement in a way that sets up and glorifies "the religious certitudes of the pious Christians."
that, so the argument goes, believers suffering under the affliction that wickedness brings can continue to trust in God in the faith that wickedness will not prevail against them. Moreover, Calvin's approach offers a warning against any and all attempts to depend upon readings of our experiences or perceptions. Prayer does not see in the larger patterns of events (or histories) how God acts, or what fulfils God's will, or "answers" our prayers. There might be clues, and patterns that provide certain kind of signs, but the pressure of Calvin's perspective is to deny any stabilizing or systematizing reading of these necessarily ambiguous appearances. 84 "God's providence," Calvin maintains, "does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense, clothes it with the means employed." 85 Consequently Schreiner argues, "Calvin believed that although history can reflect the providence of God, he also knew that the disorders in history often cast a 'cloud' between human perception and God's providential rule. Believers can now only 'see through a mirror dimly' and 'only in part,' because they cannot perceive God's providence at work or comprehend the rational governance and the forces of societal chaos. No wonder, Calvin maintains, there exists an almost universal belief that all things are governed by chance and that the world is aimlessly tossed about by the blind impulse of fortune." 86 After all, "In this world Christ was rejected." 87 The task for Calvin is to learn to see well, to see beyond apparent "chance" and contingency the hidden directing of God. So, commenting on Psalm 23 Calvin declares that "the psalmist praises the watchfulness of God so that we may learn God's invisible providence with the eyes of faith." 88

In this context it is worth reflecting for a moment on Calvin's relationship to Stoicism, that cluster of philosophical sensibilities that is frequently presented as displaying a pronouncedly fate-full (or deterministic/fatalistic) undercurrent. It is well-known that the young Humanist

84. A parallel consideration is that of Calvin's account of the assurance of salvation. According to Wilhelm Niesel, considerations of signs of election apart from the sign of Jesus Christ as our election departs from the notion of sola gratia (ibid., 178-79). Muller, on the other hand, claims that while "Calvin does point to an assurance that comes not directly from Christ and the Gospel", the syllogismus practicus, he warns "against its misuse and misinterpretation" (Muller, Christ and the Decree, 25).
85. Calvin, Inst., 1.17.4.
86. Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory, 32. See Calvin, Inst., 1.16.2.
88. Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, 263.
Calvin published a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (1532) in which he praised the Stoic notion of the superintendence (*procurationem*) of human affairs by the gods that left nothing to mere chance (*fortunae*). At the very least, François Wendel maintains very generally, “it is quite possible that the importance he afterwards attributed to this notion of providence was at least partly of Stoic origin.”^8^9 On the other hand, P.H. Reardon argues that the “earliest of the Reformer’s works shows no great preoccupation with the Stoic doctrine of providence.”^9^0 In the *Institutes* of 1539 Calvin disassociates himself from Stoic fatalism on the grounds that theology does not promote any identification of God with natural processes and thus any *necessitas* in experience that flows from a constant connection of causes (*ex perpetuo causarum nexu*). Instead, among other things, theology affirms the necessary transcendence of the Governor.^9^1 God, he would say in 1554, is “bound by the necessity of fate” in Stoicism.^9^2

Whatever the potential theological difficulties that Calvin’s account of the twofold knowledge of God (*duplex cognitio dei*) as Creator and as Redeemer (the controversy coming over how to understand this “and”) may have, in relation to the doctrine of providence the discussion of sin as blinding, perverting, and misdirecting is instructive. In the postlapsarian condition, any and all creaturely perceptions are themselves disordered or polluted by sin.^9^3 So commenting on *Psalm* 23, echoing his reflections in the *Institutes* on sin, Calvin says that “For although the evidences of his care are continually before our eyes, the greater part of mankind is blind, and invent a blind chance to match their blindness.”^9^4

Given that this is the case, it becomes considerably more difficult to tie Calvin’s account of providence to the types of “natural orders” that justified and sustained, for instance, apartheid under the largely Dutch Reformed regime, appeals to Manifest Destiny, the Nazi appeal to German culture and the inexorable history/logic of providence


^9^0. Reardon, “Calvin on Providence,” 523.


^9^2. Cited in Reardon, “Calvin on Providence,” 526.


(Vorsehung) or destiny (Schicksal), and so on. In effect, then, what is claimed of providence should not be dislocated from its moorings in the Gospel, both in terms of it as a formal claim (that we can only know God as governing agent insofar as our perception is reoriented in the saving encounter), and in terms of its material shape (that providence is ordered towards the well-being of the God of Jesus Christ). As G. C. Berkouwer exclaims, "History illustrates the results of a confession of Providence without Christ, whether in the form of a religiously clothed national socialism or in the conclusions of a consistent natural theology. Phantoms of gods and idols and deified creatures appear on the stage of human existence." For Berkouwer, the events of the 1930s, especially in the capitulations of central Europe to, among other things, a particular appeal to providence by Hitler, is theologically revealing: "The ‘German Christians’ opened the eyes of many of us to the dangers of reading God’s purpose from historical facts." The contextualities of such appeals to history and experiences tell Berkouwer much: "Was it not possible for the Soviet Church to give a similar interpretation of history? ... In fact, cannot everyone according to his own prejudice and subjective whim canonize a certain event or national rise as a special act of God in which He reveals and demonstrates His favour?" Later, however, we will need to ask the question to what extent this crucial set of theological connections features in Calvin’s discussion of providence.

On saying all this, however, one cannot leave uncriticized at this point a considerably less modest feature of Calvin’s work. Frequently a Pauline-like sense of the deep connection of his own voice with that of God is on display, and consequently an inattentiveness to the problems of ideology and self-deception (which at the very least would require more hesitancy and modesty in Calvin’s self-presentation/understanding). This form of discourse functions in certain political ways, and with distinctly sinister consequences. In his 1558 text The Secret Providence

95. The political implications of the doctrine of providence are critical. To cite G. C. Berkouwer, “With this concept of [divine] sustenance the confession [of the [Heidelberg Catechism] at once opposes every claimant to absoluteness in this world—gods and idols, and any who would autonomously and sovereignly pretend to a self-existent existence” (Berkouwer, The Providence of God, 50).

96. Ibid., 45–46.

97. Ibid., 164.

98. Berkouwer discusses the difference in interpretation between the “Constantinian” theologian Lactantius and the markedly dissimilar Augustine of Hippo (ibid., 164–66).
of God Calvin announces against his detractors: "Insofar as you abruptly call this the doctrine of the Devil, you certainly regard yourself as a judge of great authority."99 His critique here is of the ability of his critics to hubristically overstretch themselves and claim knowledge that one might call "absolute." And yet he clearly associates his work with the work of God, and does so in a manner that prevents criticism of him (since that would entail criticism of God): "You proceed to invent monsters so that by defeating them you might celebrate a triumph over an inoffensive servant of God."100 Likewise, he deals with his critics in vicious terms, and while not uncommon for the age he certainly nevertheless often dubiously tends to rely on insult as much as, if not more than, argument. His critics' work is unquestionably equated with that of Satan while Calvin excuses his own passionate polemic against them: "No man will ever bear the insults of the Devil with calm moderation unless he turns his thoughts from them and toward God alone. May God restrain you, Satan."101

The second broad consideration follows directly from these reflections, and concerns the nature of the gap between creaturely events and divine action. Calvin wants both to affirm that "nothing which men undertake is accomplished unless God wills it" and simultaneously to deny that God is the author of sin. Crucially he does the latter not by denying the evilness of evil which would be the normal recourse of a "determinism" in which all things are effectively caused by God solely.102 In this he

100. Ibid., 105. Cf. Ibid., 59, 60.
101. Ibid., 122. Sever critics suggest that T. F. Torrance too verges on an appeal to a privileged knowledge unsullied by cultural contamination. See, for example, Hardy, "T. F. Torrance," 88; Patterson, Realist Christian Theology, 17. Firstly, there is his tendency to discount any role for constructing reality in our knowing of it, albeit Torrance's is a "soft" rather than a "hard" realism. Secondly, he underplays the formative role in the epistemic process of historical and cultural conditioning. Thirdly, Torrance spends little time reflecting on the types of particularities that would issue in a less "unreal" or abstract feel in his theological anthropology. Is this a flaw at the level of pneumatology? Whether it is or is not, there is something naïve in Gary W. Deddo's claim that "strong opposition to Torrance's pneumatology will mostly come about at the level of profoundly different presuppositions regarding the Holy Spirit rather than over secondary matters," Deddo, "The Holy Spirit in T. F. Torrance's Theology," 104. As Ray S. Anderson more substantially puts it, "Torrance's firm grounding in the reformed tradition tends toward an epistemology of the Holy Spirit rather than a praxis of the Holy Spirit" (Anderson, "Reading T. F. Torrance as a Practical Theologian," 177).
102. Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, 273.
claims he is following the "clear witness of Scripture." Of course, this form of defense is itself open to suspicion—for instance, over whether Calvin's hermeneutic is sufficiently sophisticated to enable his move from Scriptural witness to theological proposal, and whether he fails to consider attendant difficulties with conceiving of Scripture as a theological handbook or manual so that theological assertions taken from the diverse set of Scriptural materials can sit uncomfortably alongside each other in a fashion that could legitimately be criticized as inconsistency. For many critics Calvin's holding together of creaturely responsibility for wickedness and the divine sovereignty over all events is an example of just one such inconsistency, and thus better theological assessment needs to be made of Calvin's proposals than one that would stop short at his assertion that he is merely following the example of Scripture.

With regard to the issue of wickedness, Calvin's comments on Acts 2:23 are instructive. He admits that the apostle "Peter seems to suggest that the wicked did God's will." Calvin judges two lines of reading this to be "absurdities": "either that God does evil, or that whatever wickedness men may perpetrate, they do not sin." The latter absurdity is rejected on the grounds "that even though the wicked carry out what God himself has ordained, obeying God is the last thing they do. For obedience comes from a willing disposition, and we know that the purpose of the wicked is inspired by something far different. Besides, nobody but one who knows God's will obeys him. . . . But God has revealed his will to us in the law. Therefore, they only obey God whose deeds fulfill the demands of the rule of the law, who, therefore, submit themselves willingly to its authority." This does not let Calvin off Sanders' hook, but seemingly implicates him in some conceptual nonsense—how can the wicked be held responsible if God has effectively willed their wicked acts? It does, however, at least indicate that Calvin is struggling to resist the notion that God is the author of evil; and that whatever he means by God's will, and the effective carrying out of God's will, it is not the willing of wickedness since God's will is revealed in the Law that unmasks wickedness. Calvin subsequently tackles the first of the two absurdities by denying "that God does evil." His reason is "because it suggests that God is disposed to wickedness." The defense is constructed in terms of

103. Ibid.
104. Ibid., 268.
105. Ibid.
character or disposition, with the sinful creature "bound" to sin by her sinful nature, something that is nonsense when applied to God. "God, who makes use of men's wickedness, must not be put in the same class as them."\(^{106}\) The reason for this is that God "never deviates from his nature, which is perfect rectitude." This argument suggests two lines of reasoning. The first is the straightforward idea that all of God's acts, no matter what they are, are good. Here, of course, can come the complaint that then God can do anything and it would be accounted good, one horn of the dilemma in Plato's *Euthyphro*. More specifically theologically, God's just nature is reflected in the Law, and Calvin speaks of sin as itself against the Law and thus "The will of God is attacked."\(^{107}\) The second is the notion that God uses the wicked deeds of sinful creatures in order to bring good out of evil, and this allows Calvin to instrumentalize wickedness without justifying it (or denying its sheer evilness). As he warns, "One must not imagine that God works through an iniquitous man in the same way that he works through a stone or a tree trunk. Rather, according to the quality of nature he has given them, God makes use of them as rational creatures."\(^{108}\) It is this that permits Calvin to distinguish between God's working in and through wickedness in order to do and produce good, and the creature's misused agential responsibility: "While God accomplishes through the wicked what he has decreed by his secret judgment, they are not excusable, as if they obeyed his precept which out of their own lust they deliberately break."\(^{109}\)

This line of reasoning is promising for indicating that Calvin's account of divine providence, as the effective directiveness of God's caring will, is not intended to involve divine omnicausality. Yet if the motif of the "secrecy" of divine providence is overplayed it can encourage a dislocation of the will of God from the revealing of that will, even if we only know that will partially. In other words, "secrecy" has to be located as a quantitative term (that God in Self-revealing is too rich for our understanding, thus always entailing a "to be-ness" or a "yet-to-comeness") rather than a qualitative one (that God's "secret" will is materially dif-

106. Ibid., 269.
107. Ibid., 278.
109. Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.18.4. God can and does "use evil instruments to do good" (ibid., 1.17.5).
ferent from God’s “revealed” will). Otherwise, the concept functions
to overdetermine the divine will’s hiddenness in a way that separates it
from the intensiveness of divine will’s revealedness and thus opens up
the danger of either the scholastic notion of the two wills of God, or the
hiddenness of the single will in a sense that qualitatively distinguishes
(rather than quantitatively) the revelation of God and the divine being
in and of itself. However, Calvin here can at least be seen as attempting
to demystify the notion of the “secret providence of God” lest believers
excuse God for tyranny by being “God,” and he maintains instead that
“God’s secret will” does not create “in order to destroy what is good” but
“invites all men to repentance” even if we do not yet understand (what is
entailed by the “secret”) just how it is that God’s good creature destroys
itself “by his [viz., the creature’s] own guilt.”

Importantly Calvin cautions of the inability to understand God’s
will. In and of itself this is a potentially ambiguous appeal. At its best,
it protects the claim to the imperceptibility of divine providence in the
messiness of creaturely life, and sustains the theologically important
sense of divine transcendence, and thus uncontrollability from the side
of the creature. Calvin feels that the believer is given sufficient reason to
continue to trust in and life under the providence of God. So much so
that the following confession is both necessary and affirmed with bold-
ness: “Nothing is decreed that is not just and wise. . . . [Consequently,]
nothing is decreed by him without the best reason. If today we are un-
aware of that reason it will be made known in the last day.” But on
the other, it can function to displace any challenge to Calvin’s account.
In this latter respect the rhetoric is too closely bound up with issues of
power and control, Calvin’s power and control, as the reflections on the
“voice” of Calvin earlier suggests.

What about the question of the “permissive will” of God? Calvin
generally rejects the notion. For instance, he claims that “Adam fell not

110. J. G. Riddell: “The fatal separation between the God who wills—in eternal
decrees, and the God who acts—in redemptive purpose—has its counterpart in the
traditional tension between the justice of God and His mercy” (Riddel, “God’s Eternal
Decrees,” 359).

111. Calvin, The Secret Providence of God, 71, see also 76. Calvin declares that God’s
will is one and simple, even though it may appear to us that there is some discrepancy
between God’s “secret counsel and what he requires of us” (ibid., 93).

112. E.g., Calvin, Inst., 1.17.1–2; 1.18.3.

only by the permission of God but by his secret counsel.” 114 According to Schreiner, “For Calvin, divine power maintains order, restrains the waters, and curbs or bridles both the savage beasts and the wicked will. To posit a permissive will in God was, in Calvin’s view, to cast doubt on this powerful control that God exercised over creation.” 115 It is a frightening prospect for Calvin that “if anything is left to fortune, the world is aimlessly whirled about.” 116 This is to reduce the providentially active God to something of an idle spectator, and that is the worst indignity that can be paid to God’s creative care—it is, in a word, idolatry. So on Psalm 33 he declares: “heaven is not a palace for idle pleasures, as the Epicureans imagine, but a king’s seat of government from which God exercises his empire in all the realms of the world. But if God has set his seat in the sanctuary of the heavens in order to rule the universe, it follows that he by no means ignores earthly affairs, but controls them with the highest reason and wisdom.” 117

Significantly, however, it is actually not a “permissive will” that Calvin worries most about, but rather a bare “permission” (which then becomes largely passive) that is separated from God’s “will” (which is largely active). In this regard he complains about those “Good men who fear to expose the justice of God to the slanders of the impious [and who consequently] take refuge in the distinction that God wills some things to be done and only permits others. As if, without his will, any freedom of action would be possible for men!” 118 The question remains, how does this “protection” of the righteousness of God’s will that is revealed in the Law relate to the making of the sinner responsible for her sinful work when Calvin insists that all things are the will of God? The key is to make some important conceptual distinctions, and for Calvin one distinction is between “will” and “precept,” thus requiring “God’s will” not to be understood as a universal term but rather as one which carries multiple meaning. Likewise he declares that while nothing is done except by God’s will “it is an intolerable blasphemy to pretend that therefore nothing happens except by his approval.” 119 In other words, while he can say that

114. Ibid., 65.
115. Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory, 34. See Calvin, Inst., 1.16.8, 1.18.1–2.
117. Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries, 263.
118. Ibid., 273.
wickedness falls somehow under the category of God's willing it is not approved of by God. "[N]othing pleases him," Calvin continues, "except righteousness," and thus "we cannot judge our own deeds rightly except by the law of God, which testifies without deception to what pleases and displeases him." Calvin even claims to deny that sinners "are serving God's will," although "we [do] serve his just ordinance by doing evil.

The pressure of this discourse is accordingly towards something like a properly articulated and defined understanding of a form of the divine "permission" of wickedness. So Calvin exhorts: "Let them recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger toward carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, indeed commanded." Similarly, when writing on Acts 2:23, he declares that "when Christ was delivered by the hands of wicked men, and crucified, it was done by the consent and decree of God." Notice that Calvin does not say that it was done "by the will" of God. While he is concerned to emphasize God's power or control over the creature, he is so in a way that requires an attempt to reorient notions of divine "power" away from suspicions of tyrannical forms of control. Consequently, he rejects the Scotist distinction between the potentia absoluta and the potentia ordinata, God's "infinite" (and not "absolute") power and justice. By claiming that somehow all deeds are done "by the will of God" and yet being resistant to claiming that sin is done "by God's will" Calvin sounds a broadly Augustinian note–evil is, then, not a "doing," as such, an active expression of the nature of the creature qua creature but instead an "undoing," or an expression of the nature of the creature qua sinner that perverts and destroys (or at least attempts to destroy) the proper nature of creatureliness. As Wood explains, "God concurs in creaturely doings, but not in what we might call creaturely

120. Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, 279.
121. Calvin, Inst., 1.17.5.
122. Ibid., 1.17.11.
123. Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, 268.
124. "I not only repudiate but detest the schoolmen talking nonsense about absolute power, because they separate his justice from his supreme authority" (Calvin, The Secret Providence of God, 64).
‘undoings’. If this is indeed the case then, at the very least, Calvin requires a more careful spelling out of his logic at crucial points in his doctrine of providence. Moreover, the conceptuality can enable Calvin to continue to emphasize divine sovereignty or providential care over all things (and indeed patience with all things), refusing to make any acts independent of God (those that attempt to be acts of independence are named “sin”), and consequently articulating God’s ability to bring good out of wickedness.

Calvin frequently speaks of the instrumentality of sinners, albeit importantly not in the manner of Huldrych Zwingli’s omnicausal scheme but rather in terms of God’s bringing good out of evil. The Frenchman tends, as a result, to speak of the afflictions experienced by God’s people in terms of testing or chastising. Such talk is developed in order to encourage vigilance among his readers and to direct them back to the ground and source of their being. In that respect, as he declares regarding the Assyrians as “the rod of God’s anger” in Isaiah 10:5, the announcement of coming punishment functions in a twofold manner: “to terrify the wicked by letting them know that God’s threats to destroy them are not empty words,” and to “mitigate the sorrow of the faithful with some word of comfort” that the sufferings will not be the fruit of chaotic purposelessness. And yet Calvin is equally determined to dissociate suffering and simple confessions of the guilt of the afflicted, as can be seen in his comments on John 9:2, for instance. Of course, an important hermeneutical question arises at this point: how are we to read the situation, to attempt to understand what those reasons are, and thus how we are to respond? Niesel is correct to observe that in Calvin “The question of God and evil cannot be solved.” And yet there remains too little sense, at least in his discussion of providence, of the surd quality of wickedness, the sheer and irreducible evilness of evil that can make no sense within a theological “system.” Sufferings under fallen conditions, and the very existence of those conditions are not absurd in Calvin’s rhetoric. Moreover, they are not destructive since Calvin wants

127. Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries, 271, 270.
128. Ibid., 282.
to continually stress that wickedness is bridled or restrained by God.\textsuperscript{130} In fact, he claims, God “will not suffer anything to happen but what may turn out to its good and salvation.”\textsuperscript{131} The pastoral situation is important to understanding how this language functions, and as Schreiner argues, “Calvin’s world was simply too dangerous a place to leave it to the realm of secondary causation. It needed God.”\textsuperscript{132} Of course, Calvin is hesitant to determine where and how God’s hand can be seen in events, but offers providence as the “comfort” of believing that nothing happens outwith God’s sovereign purposiveness. Nonetheless, as a result there is something of an unreal feel about Calvin’s work at this juncture, and the danger is that he relies on an overly glib rhetoric. Moreover, there are political implications. Sufferers are impressed to “patience and peaceful moderation of mind” (despite his exhortations to \textit{prudentia}), which is not the message of radical resistance and righteous protest to ameliorable conditions for the sake of the Gospel of healing but of something closer to quiescence.\textsuperscript{133} With such an emphasis on divine determination in world governance there is naturally little place for \textit{lament} in Calvin’s treatment of providence in the \textit{Institutes}, and it is unsurprising, therefore, that Calvin finds himself little in sympathy with the complaining Job (he has more empathy with Elihu). Summarizing the attitude of those who have made no little progress in their meditation on divine providence he writes, “The Lord willed it, it must therefore be borne; not only because it is unlawful to strive with him, but because he wills nothing that is not just and befitting.”\textsuperscript{134}

The third main thing to observe is the way in which Calvin seeks to protect the transcendent sovereignty of God and the integrity and responsibility of creaturely agency through the claim that “God’s action

\textsuperscript{130} See, e.g., Calvin, \textit{Calvin’s Commentaries}, 272.

\textsuperscript{131} Calvin, \textit{Inst.}, 1.17.6.


\textsuperscript{133} Citation from Calvin, \textit{Inst.}, 1.17.8. Calvin’s rhetorical verging on ethical quietism is for a quite different theological reason than those quietisms that operate by way of dualistically spiritualizing the theological act and thus leaving behind deep ethical commitments to materiality. Wood maintains that “It is no accident . . . that the emphasis in the doctrine [of providence] is on preservation, stability, order, and harmony, and that the virtues it inculcates are mainly passive. Our duty under God’s providence is to adjust to the way things are, to accept the order of things, and to receive with all humility and gratitude what God sends us” (Wood, \textit{Providence}, 72).

\textsuperscript{134} Calvin, \textit{Inst.}, 1.17.8.
is distinct from man's, so that his providence is free from all iniquity, and his decrees have no affinity with the wrongdoings of men." Here Calvin uses to some effect the Thomistic imagery of *causa prima* and *causae secundae*. The Swiss Reformer of Zurich, Zwingli, had so emphasized the immediacy of God to the creature, the one true cause, that secondary causes became largely redundant in his theology of providence. According to Schreiner, "Calvin [himself] was ambivalent about the role of secondary causes." The main reason for this is, Schreiner continues, his fear of slipping into affirming "blind instinct" which imprisons God in a chain of secondary causes. In this sense Calvin continues to stress the instrumentality of creaturely causes in relation to divine agency. Nevertheless, Schreiner's reading would suggest that there is an important question as to be asked: what goes on between the writing of Calvin's treatise against the Libertines, in which there is a strong rebuttal of determinism and a vigorous defense of the integrity of secondary causes, and the 1559 *Institutes* in which this ethos appears less well developed? "Calvin's inclination to mitigate secondary causes resulted from his understanding of nature and of history. Order and harmony are not, in his view, "natural" to creation. After the fall, disorder further upset a previously beautiful but precarious harmony. And history is always awash in blood. Calvin's world was simply too dangerous a place to leave it to the realm of secondary causation. It needed God." According to R.S. Wallace, commenting on the doctrine of predestination, "He believed that the only way in which he could adequately meet the pastoral care needs of many anxious people around him was to dwell on the theme of God's grace in our predestination." But Schreiner's claim reveals a theological problem. The conceptuality of primary and secondary causes does not separate out divine and creaturely in any simple sense, and thus not "leave" the world free of a God it actually needs.

Moreover, it is certainly the case that the 1559 text is less emphatic on secondary causality than earlier texts, and the heat of controversy must take the blame for at least some of that shift in ethos, but arguably the theological sensibility has not been destroyed. So Calvin significantly declares, that while "the Christian heart ... will ever look to him

137. Ibid., 32.
as the principal cause of things, yet will give attention to the secondary causes in their proper place.” It is this conceptuality that allows claims about the existence of sin and wickedness, as evil that is not authored by God, to theologically function beyond being simple rhetorical assertion or conceptual nonsense. Wicked acts are to be assigned to creaturely agencies which, although subordinate to the divine action, carry the sole responsibility for wrongdoing. So Muller declares that “Here also is Calvin’s defense against the charges of Bolsec that he had followed Lorenzo Valla in the development of an utterly deterministic system: this is not a thoroughgoing necessitarianism insofar as it respects contingency and real possibility at the level of secondary causes. Calvin could state categorically that God had not ‘necessitated the sin of men.’

It is this perspective that enables Calvin to maintain the integrity of “secondary causes” and therein counsel against rash (because “God-protected”) behavior in favor of proper prudence. Thus for Calvin, providence does not negate human endeavor or practical wisdom, but, we could add, grounds it while not making any acts, even sinfully distorted ones, theologically insignificant (so that 1. they do not take God by surprise, 2. they are in some way broadly “willed” by God, although “will” here requires the requisite distinctions to be made, and 3. God can still mitigate their destructive potential and direct them to generate more profitable consequences). All the same, it can be somewhat misleading, and under a more hardened monocularly “deterministic” providential scheme than Calvin’s this talk directs agency onto paths that can be much less prudentially wise and more quiescent.

It is little wonder, then, that Calvin opposes what looks like a proto-deism, with its connecting of providence with foreknowledge. The references in Institutes 1.16.4 seem to be to late-medieval Aristotelian Averroists with their appeal to the First Cause, and to a resurgent Epicureanism, and according to Calvin at least, they claim that God

139. Calvin, Inst., 1.17.6.
140. The example that Calvin provides is that of the rays of the sun which may cause the corpse to putrefy, yet the stink is to be attributed to the corpse and not to the sun (Calvin, Inst., 1.17.5).
141. Muller, Christ and the Decrees, 24, citing Calvin’s Reply to Bolsec.
143. See Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries, 274; Inst., 1.17.4.
144. See Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory, 20.
“foresaw” events and therefore did not intervene in their unfolding. Yet, in contrast, providence “pertains no less to his hands than to his eyes.” Divine foreknowledge is itself a function of the divine will which is a necessary and sufficient condition for what comes to pass. It is crucial for Calvin that God attends to the regulation of all events. All events proceed from God’s set plan, thus “nothing takes place by chance.” God “in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed.”

It is certainly the case that “causal” conceptuality is limited in its aims and role, but nonetheless if developed appropriately this form of thinking would enable Calvin to maintain both his strong sense of divine sovereignty (that all things are caused by God) and an equally strong sense of creaturely integrity, without the kinds of modern compatibilist scrambling since we are not speaking of two comparable types of causality, that all things have simultaneously creaturely causes. As Wood maintains, “Ascribing an occurrence to God is not a substitute for a “natural” explanation for it, or vice versa. The two do different sorts of work in different contexts.” That is what Sanders fails to appreciate about the concursus, and consequently he slips into a conflictual account so that no event can be both a divine and a creaturely free action. His account of prayer, then, operates with a “relay-race” type structure with the prayer calling upon God, and God then reacting by answering the

146. Ibid., 1.16.8.
147. Terry J. Wright incorrectly claims that “causal” language in the doctrine of providence’s sense of concursus “risks reducing creaturely activity to the effect of the divine cause” (Wright, “Reconsidering Concursus,” 207). Indicating that he misunderstands the function of “causal” talk he responds, “The biblical witness portrays God not as causing creaturely actions but calling creatures to act . . . and towards a response rather than to a reaction” (207–8). He claims that “’Cause,” then, has an unnecessary mechanical feel to it” (208). That, however, is because of what modernity has done to causality, reducing the fourfoldness of the Aristotelian distinction. It is that which then forces Wright to misread Calvin (214). As Berkouwer observes, the theme of concursus “was not intended to involve God in a system of causality to which He would then be subject and in which He, like man, was just another cause, though the prima causa. On the contrary, the purpose of the distinction was to avoid the pantheistic notion which might identify the two, making God a part of the causal system of nature” (Berkouwer, The Providence of God, 154). Cf. Torrance, The Mediation of Christ, xii.
prayer in some shape and form. Admittedly Calvin tends not to press his insights sufficiently far here, particularly failing to clearly make and substantively sustain the necessary distinctions between forms of causality, between forms of "patient waiting," and between the willing of God. This means that he makes it more difficult for himself to sufficiently distinguish between those events that God wills and those that are opposed to the divine intention. He needs more of the kind of qualification involved in a claim like "God relates in different ways to different creaturely goings-on." Moreover, it is odd and potentially limiting to prudence or practical reason that, when speaking of providence, Calvin tends to seriously underplay biblical notions of divine and human resistance to wickedness and struggle of the threat to the divine rule.

While the theological tools are arguably present in his work, he regularly depends too much on both an over-determined or distinction flattening and unsubtle rhetoric, and the frequent unqualified assertiveness of simple polemic. It is these, more than his slightly better nuanced theological arguments, that have the effect of pulling in a different direction. Thus, in spite of all his hesitancies and claims to nescience it has been difficult to shake off the worry for many readers that he tips over into causal determinism. So Leith argues that Calvin's horror of "deism" leads him to the brink of pantheism, a position he only avoids by repeated stress on divine transcendence. The difficulty is that there is something of a wedge opening up between the reality of God's divinity

149. This is accentuated by Sanders' postulation of a "libertarian freedom" for human beings. (Sanders, The God Who Risks, 14).

150. Colin E. Gunton regards "the unqualified assertion of divine willing is not adequate to escape a tendency to necessitarianism" (Gunton, The Triune Creator, 151). Gunton pushes Calvin in a pneumatological direction in order to solve many of the problems in his account (179–80). While Calvin may have been, not altogether inaccurately, described as "the theologian of the Holy Spirit" by B. B. Warfield, pneumatology is conspicuously absent from his remarks on providence. A fuller doctrine of the Spirit, however, according to Gunton, may enable one to speak of creation as a project or a site under construction, rather than as a perfect expression of a divine scheme. In moving the world to its telos, the Spirit is active not in ways that are deterministic, yet as decisively shaping the final outcomes.

151. Wood, "How Does God Act?" 149.

152. Where these are present, they describe at most epistemological limitation. Behind what appears uncertain and confused, there lies the steady and immutable will of God.

and humanity in a way that subverts the integrity of the latter, and the integrity of the form of union (without division or separation) that supports the integrity of both the divine and the human (without confusion or change). Questions about Calvin's ability to sustain the hypostatic union, for example, have been frequent asked when the logic of christological aspects of his work have been pressed. When this tension hardens into a theological system the effect is that God is shut out of the world—the God-given union of divine and human as summed up in the incarnate event will accordingly not sufficiently regulate the matter or mood of the theology. It is this that undermines the more careful theological notion of “double agency,” replacing it instead with either the kinds of conflictual terms for the relations that give birth to modern theism, deism, and atheism, predicated as they are largely on commitments to creaturely indeterminacy, or an account of the world in which it becomes conceptually difficult for theology to imagine and understand contingency in intramundane causality. At the very least, to draw on a more general statement of Berkouwer's, it is crucial to admit that “Only a clear perception of the radical difference between the Providence doctrine and determinism will guard against much confusion... Since we have to do with the Providence of God, everything else, including planning, determining, and acting, is different.”

Context, of course, is crucial to providing a good reading, and the aretological function of Calvin's work is important to remember. Even so, it is of little use arguing, in Leith's words, that “Calvin wrote his theology to persuade, to transform human life.” While this claim is indeed a good one insofar as it describes one of Calvin's main objectives, it generates certain problems with regard to the doctrine of providence. For Calvin a statement such as all things come to pass by the divine dispensation is a word of beautiful solitude: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). This elicits an attitude of trust that nothing can happen by fortune or chance, affords comfort, and promotes constancy throughout the Christian life. Or does it? Is it a comfort those suffering unbearably to believe in a God who “wills” (if that term is understood without proper qualification) their suf-

154. See, for example, McCormack, “For Us and Our Salvation,” 286, 288.
ferring? Does not the question of divine tyranny not again raise its head uncomfortably? Moreover, in the face of life's fragility, what does this do to resist the suppression of proper complaint or questioning, of an interrogation of holy protest that refuses to be silenced in face of injustice by either the powerful or the politically quiescent appealing to the inscrutability of God's ways or asserting the faithfulness of their voices to that of God? One of Karl Barth's worries with later Protestant versions of providence is that Christian obedience comes to be construed in terms more reminiscent of Stoic resignation. In the light of the troubles of history Calvin's urge to acceptance "with humble and docile hearts of all (without exception) that is put before us in Holy Scripture," especially when Calvin's voice functions as something of an oracle for the understanding of those Scriptures, begins to look distinctly sinister.

Of course, this is manifestly a Christological problem since it is in christology that God is Self-identified as the One who is the "power" to give, and give even unto the loss of death on a cross; and that God's ways with creatures in Christ do not deny but rather confirm and reform creaturely agencies for the flourishing of all of God's creation. It is in Jesus Christ that the dynamic Reality of God's Being-in-act is intensively, or more precisely incarnately, enacted in creature reality. For this reason, Torrance explains, "everything we actually think and say of God must be constrained and controlled within the bounds of the revelation of the Father in and through the incarnate Son." Unpacking the theology of divine agency with an intensified focus on the narrated performance of Jesus of Nazareth would, therefore, provide a quite different feel. So, Torrance continues, considerations of divine "almightiness" (which inform the concept of divine sovereignty and thus governance) are reconstituted, moving away from "the idea of limitless arbitrary power" in order to ask "what God has done and continues to do in Jesus Christ."

Calvin himself has frequently been criticized for underplaying the constitutive significance of christology in his theology, most notably at

158. Barth, Church Dogmatics III/3, 116.
159. Calvin, Inst., 1.18.4 as cited in Niesel.
161. Ibid, 82. Cf. Torrance, The Mediation of Christ, 70; Wood, "How Does God Act?" 150. Mackintosh, The Originality of the Christian Message, 70: "The same Father who saves the world at the cost of Jesus is he who omnipotently guides the world, and the single lives within the world to a blessed end. Providence is correlative to the cross."
the point of his controversial doctrine of predestination.\textsuperscript{162} Barth, for instance, argues that "All the dubious features of Calvin's doctrine result from the basic failing that in the last analysis he separates God and Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{163} Equally, it is noticeable that in his discussions of providence christology appears to play little role, at least explicitly. (It is important to add this last subclause in order to provide a critical hesitation in the logic of the critique being developed here—a lack of explicit discussion is not necessarily an indication of a lack at the level of implicit constitution, grounding and regulation.) Barth regards this as a problem with the Reformed tradition in general, complaining of "the astonishing fact" of its "almost total failure even to ask concerning the Christian meaning and character of the doctrine of providence, let alone to assert it."\textsuperscript{164} Accordingly, despite all else it says, it offers an "empty shell" as "the object of the Christian belief in providence."\textsuperscript{165} McCormack, consequently, damningly proclaims that "Calvin's concept of God was finally that of a being complete in itself before it ever thinks, wills and acts. It was an abstract concept of divine being, fleshed through a process of philosophical reflection without reference to the concrete acts of God."\textsuperscript{166}

Nonetheless, with regard to Calvin all is not lost according to many of his critics. So when J.C. McLelland claims that "the normative doctrine of Reformed theology . . . is not so much the doctrine of predestination as the doctrine of union with Christ" he indicates one important line of theological repair that theologians like Torrance develop.\textsuperscript{167} In this regard, urging that the doctrine of providence requires closer attention to the relevance of such themes as "union with Christ" would precisely appear to offer an internal critique.

There is at least one reading, however, that pulls away from the model of straightforward internal repair, and that is the reading of Niesel and Muller which might suggest that there is little need for just such a critique. Calvin, Muller argues, consistently enables christology to play

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{162} So Reid, "The Office of Christ in Predestination," 5–19, 166–83.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} II/2, 111.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} III/3, 30.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} III/3, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{166} McCormack, "For Us and Our Salvation," 309.
\end{itemize}
several roles in his work—not merely in terms of soteriological effectiveness but also in terms of constitutiveness, even in his doctrine of predestination in which “Christ elects in common with the Father and may be considered as the ‘author’ of the decree.” It is for this reason that Christ is depicted as the mediator of the divine predestinating decree, and its “mirror,” and election can be claimed to be “in Christ.”169 According to Reardon, “This Christocentricity of God’s Providence in Calvin’s thinking is not to be overlooked. He can call Christ a “mirror” [speculum] of Providence precisely because the counsel of God is to bring his faithful ones to salvation in Christ.”170

Even so, it would take something of a Herculean effort to defend Calvin against the charge that his account of providence has been Christologically underdetermined, relying too heavily instead on unpacking the Scriptures regarding features like the divine will, suffering, divine hiddenness and chastisement of sinners. Christ is construed in predominantly noetic terms in these passages from Calvin as a teacher of providence,171 and consequently all too neatly as but one of several media for the exercise and effecting of divine governance.172

169. A very clear distinguishing of the function of christology in Calvin’s and Barth’s accounts of election is provided by Gibson: “The identification of Christ with God’s Self-revelation in Barth’s theology functions in such a way as to cause Christology to operate within a range of other doctrinal loci in a way that is markedly different from the function of Christology in Calvin” (Reading the Decree, 9–10). A little untidily, but not altogether unhelpfully, Gibson claims that Barth and Calvin have “principal and soteriological christocentrisms” respectively (10).
170. Reardon, Calvin on Providence, 531.
171. Calvin, Inst., 1.16.2.
172. See Wyatt, Jesus Christ and Creation in the Theology of John Calvin, 72. This is not helped by the way Calvin separates out the knowledge of God the Creator from the knowledge of God the Redeemer, placing providence in the context of the former. Certainly he mitigates the scholastic notion of the “two books,” and he does so by denying any knowledge of God that is not pietas (Calvin, Inst., 1.2.1). If developed well (dogmatically, and not as the epistemic “foundationalism” of the preambula fidei [cf. ibid., 1.6.1]) the dialectic denies that there is a world independent of the significance of knowing God (cf. Parker, “Calvin’s Concept of Revelation,” 32). But Calvin requires more fluid and dynamic ways of integrating (even within distinction) them so as to prevent Christology from being displaced from the treatments of the theological material of the “first form” of knowing.
Despite its lengthiness, this chapter is radically incomplete. It can offer little more than a modest service to some substantial issues for theological reflection, focusing on a cluster of issues arising from the work of John Calvin, and moving to make connections between theology and practice, the formation and transformation of judgment, and of persons in prayerful correspondence to the God of providential concursus, in various ways.

Reviewing Calvin's discussion has yielded some surprising results, especially its theological modesty, its pedagogical purpose, and consequently he has proven to be somewhat less unhelpful than at least Open Theists suggest. Sanders' simple deterministic reading of Calvin requires significantly more careful articulation and considerably less simplistic evaluation. Yet that is far from the end of the story, since a number of critical issues have indeed arisen concerning Calvin's inability or unwillingness to explicate with appropriate clarity and frequency significant governing concepts. In this regard Torrance's frequent governing assumption that it was "Protestant Orthodoxy" that soon "lapsed back into rather static patterns of thought" looks somewhat naïve. As Alasdair Heron argues instead, while "Calvin is certainly not responsible for everything that went wrong in the subsequent Reformed theology, . . . it is hard to let him entirely off the hook at this point."

Certainly he is not a "systematic theologian," at least in the modern sense. Yet this fact cannot be utilized as an excuse if it serves to


174. Heron, "T. F. Torrance in Relation to Reformed Theology," 41.

175. In making this claim, however, one needs to be careful and not rush headlong into an area of controversy without proper hesitancy and informed judgment. According to William J. Bouwsma, Calvin was a humanist who used rhetoric "to stimulate human beings to appropriate action. . . . The central motif of Calvin's life was not to set forth a true theology for the ages but to remedy the particular evils of his own age. He aimed not so much to state truths—he rarely made truth claims—as to galvanize other human beings to appropriate action, to induce activity, to obtain results" (Bouwsma, John Calvin, 35). Calvin, in Bouwsma's reading, becomes an anxious figure in an "age of anxiety," thus suggesting two Calvins—Calvin the schoolman, and Calvin the rhetorician (cf. Bouwsma, "Anxiety and the Formation of Early Modern Culture," 215-46). The rhetorical task was to "induce love, action, obedience, and service" (Bouwsma, John Calvin, 38). Richard A. Muller, on the other hand, has a quite different perspective: "Calvin's Institutes is a theological system—to the extent the term
mask difficulties with his claims about God's providence.\(^{176}\) “According to Paul Helm, “Calvin has a great regard for consistency in theology.”\(^{177}\) So in his 1558 defense of *The Secret Providence of God*, for instance, Calvin impresses his sensitivity to the possibility of self-contradiction in his thought. Arguably, he goes insufficiently far in demonstrating his theological consistency, and is too content to operate from “the principle that if two propositions are taught as true in the word of God they cannot be inconsistent.” Thus while he explains that *providentia* does not involve the (for Calvin, pastorally terrible) notion of divine idleness but rather the act of God’s “especial care”, and indeed constancy in care, of creatures,\(^{178}\) we must ask whether Calvin himself took sufficient “care” in his work on providence at some crucial points. Had he done so, or at least in the sense that this paper hopes he would have, he would have been in a better position to resist the deterministic readings that have blighted the receptions of both Protestant scholastics and anti-Calvinist critics. To operate on the basis of largely unpacking God’s provident sovereignty through categories such as “control”\(^{179}\) (and for Sanders, its opposite, the Self-dispossession of control) and “power” (and, similarly for Sanders, the sharing Self-relinquishing of power) may not be the most fruitful, and an account of providence will subsequently scramble to account for the relations between divine and creaturely agencies in ways that do not dissolve one into the other.\(^{180}\)

So considerably more is at stake than simple understanding, or even recasting, of Calvin’s terms of affirmation, insult, and argument. As Sanders recognizes, the very understanding of “God” is involved,

can be applied to the forms used to frame and present Christian doctrine between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries” (Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 101). He compares it with Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, and the seventeenth century “systems of theology.” Cf. Wendel, *Calvin*, 146–47; Steinmetz, “The Theology of John Calvin,” 118.


179. Ibid., 1.16.4.

180. See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 42. Opposition to “control” may not take us to “risk,” or at least not immediately. Sanders’ options of “risk” and “no-risk” accounts of providence makes “risk,” his preferred option, a negative category that (whatever its other flaws) misses the point of providence—the creative giving of God in faithfulness to sustain the life of God’s creatures for the sake of the covenantal telos. “Risk” is a category of *lack*, of absence rather than of plenitude, which is what a healthy doctrine of providence demands.
and thus theology here involves substantial considerations of iconoclash. And this is for the good of divine and creaturely relations which function to nourish creaturely life or flourishing. As Wood claims, “A Christian who lacks a significant doctrine . . . is therefore not simply uninformed about the point of Christian teaching. She or he is, in a way, unformed as a Christian, lacking in a range of conceptual abilities germane to Christian existence and practice.”

To underdetermine, whatever the reason (the extremes of polemic in controversy, overdetermined rhetoric of “control,” “comfort” as the pre-eminent spiritual effect of designing the doctrine, and so on), creaturely agencies is to negate the public interrogative dynamic of the Gospel, generating a quiescent “Yes” (or at least a “so be it”) before the sins that theo-ethical prudence can act to properly proclaim a “No” to in protest and resistance. “To ask how God is related to what goes on,” Wood asserts, “is also to ask how we are to relate ourselves to it, and, through it, to God.” This is no minor matter, and the danger is that some of the ways Calvin depicts providence weakens our “setting our faces against” wickedness. At crucial points, then, the doctrine of providence appears malnourished in Calvin’s rather clipped discussion when a substantively thicker description is required.

Recasting Calvin’s account in this fashion does not open his theology of prayer up to Sanders’ panentheistic reciprocity, but rather sharpens the sense of prayer’s place as means of God’s gift of grace in several ways. The broad lines that emerge from the previous discussion for shaping a theology of prayer can be briefly summarized in six points.

First, pre-eminently prayer is a gift of God’s sovereign graciousness which means that it does not involve a fundamental grasping after God, but rather a following of God’s richly gratuitous and hospitality making communicative way. Prayer is not, in this sense, to be understood as “efficacious” in its own right, but can only be spoken of in terms of efficacy metonymously. It does involve a divine responsiveness, only not in the manner envisaged by Openness Theology—it is instead primarily expressive of God’s response of grace to the creature God freely creates, a response that is grounding in pure donation.

Second, prayer involves a second form of responsiveness, but again the difference between this claim and Sanders’ has to do with whose re-

181. Wood, Providence, 4.
182. Ibid., 57.
sponse it is—for Calvin, it is the pray-ers’ response to God, whereas for Sanders, the rhetoric of prayer emphasizes God’s response to the pray-ers (presumably, this would be couched at some point within a scheme of divine prevenience). Prayer responds to the God on whom the pray-er depends for grace—for her very existence; for the gift of prayer itself; for the gift whereby God makes persons in Christian virtue (or faithful obedience); and it follows the movement of this God whose ways are and beneficent in being free to create and redemptively recreate all things. Prayer, then, sets the conditions for the proper ordering of human responsiveness. It is for this reason that prayer for certain types of things is dishonoring to God and disruptive of creaturely well-being, reflecting an ignorance of the divine will, or, to put another way, indicating a fundamental idolatry at the heart of the calling.183

The ordering of human being-as-responsive in prayer refuses, moreover, the denials of the integrity of creaturely agency. In the divine giving one receives the truth of who one is, and that giving is not a loss, or essentially sacrifice. Thus there is an interrogation of economic construals of relations in utilitarian terms, of impositions of the identities of persons as those to sacrifice-themselves-for-others, or even worse for in more depersonalized systems wherein the “greater good” can thus speak of persons in terms of “collateral damage.” These deny the subjectivity of praying persons before God, and impose an absoluteness of dependence which is both inappropriate for the relations of creatures to one another, and is a distortion of the absolute dependence creatures have in God—a dependency which absolutely draws us in as active subjects into the sharing of the relations that are the divine life.

Equally, because the dependency of receiving our responsive identity is formative of who we are, identities are not formed in self-aggrandizing forms of domination (God’s rule is not of that kind of dominare). That raises significant questions about calling those forms of communication that reach into the control of the divine, seeking an absolute form of manipulating, “prayer.” Even the act of praying itself cannot be understood appropriately when conceived in talk of successful techniques, since these belong to forms of “praying” as possession and control.

183. Yet even here Calvin says that “prayers which do not reach heaven by faith still are not without effect” (Calvin, Inst., 3.20.15).
Third, prayer is particular in the sense that both God as the Giver of prayer and the Pray-er who prays are identified in the person of the Mediator, Jesus of Nazareth. Considerations of prayer thus bring before us the image of God and the human—the imago dei as christically constitutive and performed because of its ontological shape in Christ, the life of the divinely creative agency in and through the eternal Logos as incarnate, the Deus manifestus in carne. Prayer's "constitutive reality [is] in Christ himself, . . . [in] the saving mystery which he is in the unity of his person and work and word as the one Mediator between God and man."

This demands the need to resist all banal and homogenizing attempts to locate the way to the divine in what we generally call "prayer." It equally means that prayer takes its place in and through Jesus, as it is shaped and reshaped to call upon the Name of God in and by participation in Christ's intercessory offering of his humanity-as-prayer to God, as is well exemplified in the Lord's Prayer.

Fourth, as prayer has its theological context in the giving of God and creature in Jesus Christ, its ongoing focus is on the flourishing of all creatures which are confessed to be the gifts of the divine creative and re-creative hand. Jesus' prayer is not a conversation with himself—not a simple practice of auto-suggestion—but of communication with his Father, which is the context of his very life, and it is so in a way that does not leave the world out. Rather, it is "world-making" (that is the heart of the hallowing of God's name—the social dynamics of feeding, being delivered from evil, of forgiving, and so on, are implications of the hallowing of God's name and it is for the sake of those that God has a name that can be called upon by the creature). Prayer, in one way or another, potentially brings to God the whole world precisely because the expansiveness of attention to creation is the irreducible context of the givingness of God in which we have our being and truth. This means that prayer has a social dynamic, taking place in the "Church" (the assemblies of God's people who are drawn into the intercessory prayer of Christ) for the sake of the well-being of "the world" (the complete range

184. Torrance, Theology in Reconciliation, 108.

185. See Jones, Transforming Judgment, 121. This does not involve a mere "imitation" or performative "copying" of Jesus' prayer, but instead it involves a learning to "read" Jesus' ministry in the light of the Lord's Prayer, so that his whole person and work is understood as prayer, as the calling upon God's Name in enacting the hallowing of that Name in the theatre of God's world.
of God's creative giving). Prayer directs pray-ers to a form of commonality, enacting a shared common identity precisely because it involves the disposing of all to interdependency on those whom the Reality of the creatively reconciling One makes real. 186

As a result, prayer cannot be practiced well as a sacred practice in contradistinction from the other practices of the human. The invocation is not for "an "other" world, different from the one god has created and given to us. It is the same world, already perfected in Christ, but not yet in us. It is our same world redeemed and restored in which Christ "fills all things with Himself." 187 Prayer involves the public act of the Christian communities" witness together to the grace of God for all things, and only then the Church as it informs the praying of (non-isolated) individuals.

Fifth, the "theatre of God's glory" in Self-giving for the sake of creaturely flourishing is, in prayer, brought in Christ to God for its healing. Pray-ers in Christ are invited into honesty, self-reflection, insight into the truth of the world and the darkest and most shadowy forms of its experienceable performance, their lamenting the sufferings under the conditions of sin. It is for this reason that at heart of prayer's invocation of the Name of God is confession—that pray-ers recognize the distortions of self, placed under judgment, and thus refuse to close off creaturely living to the need for the renewal of relations of interdependency yet to be given in the coming of God. 188 Consequently, the Church, as the locus

186. Another way of putting this, crucially, is to inextricably locate the mission-dynamic that necessarily emerges from the Church-at-prayer being performed through the healing pedagogy of the formative practices of baptism, Eucharist, ministry, forgiveness-reconciliation, and the reading of the Scriptures together. In this way prayer is grounded in the generative narrative of the acts of God as liturgically performed in the context of the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper, and so on.


188. It is precisely in this sense of brokenness that the "imperceptibility" of God's governance has its place, bringing a perceptual hesitancy to claims about the "success" of prayer, or of perceiving God's "answering" of prayer. Prayer requires not merely formation but transformation in perceptive judgment, theological wisdom, and the nature of human living. Sanders would admit the same, but his account of God may well be too untransformed itself, with its affective moments, and specifically its construal of divine agency as an agency among agencies (even if the first). As Gregory Baum argues, "if we say that the I-Thou relationship is the model to be used in theology, then we seem to set up God as the divine subject facing man, the human subject, and again conceptualize God as a fully constituted subject independent from and superior to human subjects" (Baum, "Divine Transcendence," 127). There is a recognition in Sanders
of the making-of/learning-to-be God's people, is irreducibly summoned to engage in practices that are distinctly counteractive against other sorts of distorting description (functional reduction of persons to works of consumption, and place in the production of consumptive system). Prayer, as Rowan Williams argues with regard to sacramental signification, "then requires us to set aside this damaged or needy condition this flawed identity, so that in dispossessing ourselves of it we are able to become possessed of a different identity, given the rite, not constructed by negotiation and co-operation like other kinds of social identity." Other forms of praying are unmasked to be without integrity, attempting to hide their "worldly" assumption about the way of power with pious language of the God who wills. Prayer, then, involves the penitential testing of the nature of its own workings.

Sixth, as taking place within a theological context informed by the understanding of divine and creaturely concursus (as the particular covenantal telos of the conservatio and gubernatio), prayer becomes a means of grace. It is an instrument of God for the healthy ordering of all things in and through communio with God in Christ. Prayer is a means of the gracious action of the mystery of the eternally rich God, the action through which we are transformed. It is not an effort to achieve "things," but a calling for the hallowing of God's Name by which creatures transformatively live in the communion with God by the Spirit through the mediation of Christ. Prayer as pedagogy in the life of communio in Christ, therefore, resists the notion of human development in simple therapeutic or essentially "private" terms. Prayer is an act of God's giv-

that christology involves a relocation of practices of prayer within the providence of God, although it is not altogether clear just how christology transforms the reading of the Old Testament in particular, and how far Jesus is constitutive of Christian accounts of prayer. Likewise, within Calvin's scheme there remain questions about how far he too has reoriented his approach christologically, or, more appropriately, trinitarianly. At least Calvin's account of prayer emerges from a context of which providence demands a proper hesitancy in claiming perception.

189. Williams, On Christian Theology, 209.

190. It must be asked whether there is even any such thing as a purely private therapy, and thus whether the Open Theist complaint about "therapeutic forms" of prayer itself involves something of a lazy logic. If I spend time relaxing in the morning (whether it be to music, through silent meditation, even just having a relaxing bath) then that affects my mood. But it does more than that—affecting my mood may play a crucial role in affecting how I treat my children (I may be more patient and relaxed with them), my wife, other road users (I may be a less aggressive driver), and so on. And
ing and of human response that affects and effects the shape of human formation and re-formation.

If these claims are in any way demonstrably theologically appropriate, then to hear the euangelion in and through, but also beyond, Calvin may require the following recognition: prayer is a gift of God's sovereign graciousness for the pedagogical ordering of worldly life in Christ, a gift for the making of sociality that requires the witness of responsibility for justice and charity for all those whom God loves in the creativity of the Gift of the Word. Prayer is not, then, the self-enacted therapy of the self, or the coming of the divine into involvement with the creature, but rather involves the reordering of the very way we think and experience human life. Engaging in prayer informs the struggle (when under the conditions of being healed from sinfulness) of learning to live in relation to God as paradigmatic of, and generative for, our living with and for others. Personhood requires learning to be in relation, and consequently it is important to specify how ecclesial friendships-in-prayer are the contexts in which such pedagogy takes place are related. It is here that human beings are called forth into the embrace of a life of transformative discipleship or “union with Christ” as the “foretaste” of the flourishing of all things.

this “personal” affectivity itself may prove to be affecting—so by treating people in one way and not another it may affect their mood and possibly equally the way they relate to others that day, as well as their disposition towards me, and so on. Now I am not equating prayer with what we call therapy here, but merely observing that the subjectivist interpretations of therapy do not go far enough in their articulation of its “public” effects. Thus, while what Baelz claims about prayer is not untrue but is misleading by not going far enough into the world when he claims that “we expect prayer to make a difference to the man who prays . . . In communion with God a man comes to a new knowledge of himself and a new apprehension of the world around him” (Baelz, Prayer and Providence, 111). In this context, it is very odd to hear Robert Ellis describe prayer that makes no difference to God as “distinctly passive” (Ellis, Answering God, xi). In fact, passivity is more of a problem for interventionist and panentheistically patterned accounts—prayer as human activity, and the efficacy of prayer as divine activity with concomitant pray-er’s passivity.


