Lifting our Gaze

Election, Eschatology and the Sovereignty of God

in John Calvin’s teachings on the Christian Life.

by

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the question of how the church finds its bearings in the present world. From where does the church get guidance? And how is the church’s life shaped?

Through engagement with John Calvin, I argue that the church is called to lift its gaze to Christ as it seeks to be faithful in a world marred by sin. The thesis engages with Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as well as his sermons and his commentary on Ephesians. I explore Calvin’s teaching that through the Scriptures the Spirit corrects our perception and enables us to see reality which is animated by God’s sovereign purposes revealed in Jesus Christ. That said, the doctrine of election which Calvin presents in his exegetical work on Ephesians 1 suggests an inconsistency in his teaching. I argue that Calvin’s doctrine of election is motivated by a pastoral concern to offer assurance rather than being shaped by the teachings of Scripture. As such, Calvin’s doctrine of election is not Christocentric enough.

Although Calvin’s doctrine of election represents an inconsistency in his thought, I argue that other aspects of his teaching offer the resources to redirect our gaze to Christ. Calvin’s teaching on faith and hope bear witness to an eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God. Faith and hope lift the church’s gaze to the crucified and resurrected Christ and enables the church to see beyond the immediate context to the reality of God’s sovereign purposes in Jesus Christ.

Having discussed the eschatological sovereignty of God, I argue that this teaching can help the church to hear and receive the teachings of Ephesians 1. Faith and hope in the crucified and resurrected Jesus orientates the church to God’s purposes in order to take its bearings from God alone. I conclude with comment on the identity and vocation of the church as the eschatological people of God.
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Introduction

John Calvin (1509-1564) offers an account of the Christian life that calls the church to engage with the world whilst keeping its eyes fixed on the promises of Jesus Christ. Calvin unfolds his account of the Christian life according to an understanding of reality that is subject to the Triune God’s sovereign purposes revealed in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit. Humans can perceive reality through the Spirit’s gift of faith. The Spirit speaks to the church through Holy Scripture which bears witness to God’s work in Jesus Christ. Calvin directs his work as a pastor and teacher to enable the church to receive the teachings of Scripture and live in response to the grace bestowed by God. The church’s life is marked by tension as it navigates a world that is under the power of sin whilst seeking to hold fast to the teachings of God. Calvin avers that faith and hope enable the church to look beyond the struggles of the present context and submit its life to Christ’s rule.

Calvin explores the ongoing interaction between God and humanity throughout the Institutes of the Christian Religion and his commentaries on the Scripture. Calvin invites the reader to ponder the mystery of God and to understand themselves as a creation of God. Drawing on Scripture and the way the church has heard these words in the past, Calvin guides the church to praise God and bring God glory. However, God is beyond human comprehension. What can be said about God is limited by what God has chosen to reveal to humanity. There are not always answers to the questions one brings. Instead, at the heart of Calvin’s theology is a mystery – a God to whom the proper response is fear and reverence. The revelation of God interrogates humanity and leads to a more profound knowledge of ourselves. Calvin’s teaching is not a sterile, textbook theology – but rather a contemplative theology that calls the church to deeper fellowship with God. Calvin desires that his efforts would enable the church to receive Scripture which is the authoritative guide that leads the church to worship and hope for the future life.¹

Against the backdrop of significant change and personal turmoil, Calvin’s work of teaching and preaching urges the church’s submission to the sovereign purposes of God. The context of Calvin’s work was marked by significant unrest as the events of the Reformation reshaped

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the European church and society. The theological debates of the Reformation accompanied an intellectual shift in Western Europe as classical and patristic literature was recovered and humanism emerged. Calvin was educated in the humanist tradition at the Universities of Paris, Orleans, and Bourges. He describes his 1533 experience of a “sudden conversion to teachableness” wherein he began to embrace Reformation teaching. Randall Zachmann argues that it is likely that this occurred as Calvin encountered Luther’s writings. Calvin later describes his conversion as a rejection of the fraudulent authority that the medieval Roman church had claimed which led to “ignorance and sloth.” Calvin fled Paris after being associated with a speech delivered in 1535 by Nicolas Cop, Rector of the University of Paris. The speech had “unmistakable Lutheran overtones, particularly on Law and Gospel.”

During his exile, Calvin began the task of writing in the hope that his work would guide the church in its reading of Scripture. Calvin took up residence in Basel and began to write the first edition of the *Institutes*. During the years that followed in Strasbourg and Geneva, Calvin would produce five editions of the *Institutes*, commentaries on the New Testament (excluding 2 & 3 John and Revelation), commentaries on the Pentateuch, Joshua, the Psalms, and nearly all the prophets. Calvin wrote the *Institutes* for students of ministry and intended that it be read alongside his commentaries on Scripture. Calvin hopes that together they would resource pastors for the tasks of preaching and pastoral care. Calvin assumes that the reader has knowledge of Scripture, the church fathers, medieval scholarship and the theological disputes of the day. Whilst the *Institutes* offer a general overview of the Christian faith, the commentaries provide brief elucidation of specific sections of Scripture. In addition to this productive literary output, Calvin preached through entire books of Scripture from the pulpit in Geneva. Calvin seeks to expound the Scripture’s teaching and proclaims that God has acted in Jesus Christ to save the elect. He intends to enable Christians to lead lives that bring glory to God. Throughout his teachings on the Christian life, Calvin urges the church to lift its gaze to Christ and receive the gifts that are freely offered by God.

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3 Ibid.

4 Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 34.

5 Ibid., 12.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 81.
In this thesis I will argue that Calvin teaches the church to lift its gaze to God as it seeks to navigate a world marred by sin. Calvin teaches us that God’s sovereign purposes are fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and these purposes are made known to us as the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures. The Christian life is to be shaped by the authority of Scripture. The thesis is driven by critical engagement with Calvin’s *Institutes*, commentaries and sermons. I will draw on secondary literature as appropriate. I will argue that Calvin’s use of Scripture directs us to perceive reality as animated by God’s sovereign purposes in the crucified and resurrected Christ. I will engage with a sample of Calvin’s exegetical work, his sermons and commentary on Ephesians 1, and argue that Calvin’s doctrine of election is shaped primarily by the pastoral concern to offer assurance rather than the clear teachings of Scripture. Accordingly, Calvin’s account of election is not Christocentric enough. Drawing on Calvin’s discussion on the death and resurrection of Jesus I suggest that an eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God helps lift our gaze above earthly concerns to Christ. The eschatological sovereignty of God not only offers a Christologically grounded doctrine of election, but offers also the pastoral assurance that Calvin seeks.

Attentiveness to Scripture characterises Calvin’s teaching. Calvin believes that the Scriptures are inspired and interpreted by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit plays a critical role in the revelatory and salvific work of God. Calvin teaches that the Spirit animates the Christian life through uniting the believer to the person of Christ and revealing the truth of God. The Spirit uses Scripture to communicate the teachings of God. Chapter 1 of this thesis will explore Calvin’s understanding of the nature and function of Scripture. Our discussion of Calvin’s teaching on Scripture will enable us to see how he uses Scripture to map a reality that is subject to the sovereignty of the Triune God.

A key characteristic of Calvin’s teaching is the sovereignty of God. The proclamation of God’s sovereignty reminds the church that despite their experience of the present context, God is in control and directing events according to His purposes. It provides assurance to the church. God’s sovereignty is the source of the church’s confidence in its proclamation, and it provides the basis for the Christian life. Calvin’s teaching on justification is highly attentive to God’s sovereignty. He emphasises that salvation is assured because it rests not upon the works of people, but upon the decision of God. God’s sovereign agency underscores Lutheran teaching of justification by faith and emphasises that despite the church’s experience of the present, God is in control.
Calvin unfolds the doctrine of election as a part of his teachings on justification. He seeks to provide pastoral assurance to the church as it navigates a context marred by the effects of sin. Calvin attempts to give account for why many people do not respond to the preaching of the Gospel. Calvin’s doctrine of election teaches that God chooses some for salvation and chooses others for damnation. Calvin argues that election shows us that salvation is a free choice of the sovereign God and therefore it is an act of grace. Calvin’s doctrine of election is frequently – and incorrectly – characterised as the central feature of his theology.\textsuperscript{10} Whilst he devotes considerable attention to the doctrine, Calvin uses election to buttress his teaching on the gracious sovereignty of God in the justification of sinners. In chapter two we will outline Calvin’s teachings on election in his exegetical work on Ephesians 1. We will then explore the doctrine of election in the \textit{Institutes} in chapter three. We will see that the theological choices Calvin made in his interpretation of Ephesians 1 and his teaching on the doctrine of election are not always consistent with his teachings on the use of Scripture.

Faith and hope are gifts of God that enable the church to see beyond the present context to the reality of God’s sovereign purposes in Jesus Christ. Calvin teaches that the Christian life unfolds amid this world while looking beyond the present life to the promises of God. It is an account of the Christian life that is characterised by hope and functions with an eschatological understanding of God’s sovereignty. The tension between the present life and the sovereignty of God is negotiated by the hope in God’s promises that are witnessed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In chapter four we will explore the contours of Calvin’s account of the Christian life and argue his teaching on faith and hope provide a Christologically and Pneumatologically grounded resource for proclaiming the sovereignty of God in the face of the experiences of the present.

An eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God enables the church to take its bearings from God alone. In chapter five we see that Calvin’s teachings on the eschatological sovereignty of God enable the church to trust the promises of God in the face of the present context. We will return to Ephesians 1 and use Calvin’s teachings on the eschatological sovereignty of God to guide our reading of the text. The thesis will close with some remarks on the identity and vocation of the church as the eschatological community of God.

\textsuperscript{10} This thesis will focus on the interpretation of Calvin’s writings rather than their reception by the church. For an account of the history of the \textit{Institutes} see Bruce Gordon, \textit{John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography}, Lives of Great Religious Books (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
Chapter 1 – Holy Scripture and the Knowledge of God

God sovereignly reveals Himself to humanity through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Scripture serves God’s purpose of revelation through a two-fold work of the Spirit. Calvin’s understanding of the nature and function of Scripture is secondary to God’s will to be known. God’s sovereign revelation means that Calvin’s understanding of Scripture is a derivative of his doctrine of God. In order to understand Calvin’s view of the nature and function of Scripture, we need to start with his teaching on the knowledge of God. This chapter will begin by discussing God’s will to be known before turning to explore the nature and effects of sin on our knowledge of God. This will lead to a summary of Calvin’s account of the work of Christ and the central role that the Holy Spirit plays in uniting us to Christ and sealing God’s revelation in the hearts of the believer. The exploration of the work of the Spirit provides the context for understanding Calvin’s view of the nature and function of Scripture. We will see that Calvin directs his teaching to enable the church to receive God’s Word in Scripture so that the sovereign purposes of God would shape its life. The chapter will conclude with some remarks on how Calvin’s understanding of Scripture determines his view of reality.

Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Teaching

God’s sovereign self-disclosure is at the heart of Calvin’s account of the knowledge of God. God can be known because God wills to be known and reveals Himself to humanity. In his treatment of the knowledge of God, Calvin’s starting point is the assumption that God can be known. Calvin begins the Institutes by stating that “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and ourselves.”

The revelation of God is transformative. It leads to a more in-depth knowledge of ourselves. Knowledge of God leads to reflection on the true nature of humanity. Without the knowledge of God, we cannot perceive ourselves or the world accurately. Unless God makes the knowledge of Himself accessible, it is not possible for humanity to know God. Thus, revelation is an act of grace. It is a part of the saving work of God. Calvin’s understanding of revelation emerges as he explores the nature of God and the relationship God establishes with humanity.

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1 For the purposes of consistency, I will follow Calvin’s use of the masculine pronoun for God.
2 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.1.1.
Calvin establishes that the knowledge of God is received within the context of God’s saving work. Knowledge of God comes to us as God’s redemptive purposes unfold. In the relationship that God freely establishes with humanity, we receive the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is not a speculative or intellectual exercise. Calvin asks, “what help is it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?” Rather, the knowledge of God has a Christological focus. It is concerned with the character of the God who meets us in Jesus Christ. The knowledge of God is transformative as it calls and guides humanity to its true identity and vocation as creatures made in God’s image. Knowledge of God corrects our perception and enables us to see that all that we have is a blessing from God. The result of this knowledge is humility because in the encounter with the God who is holy, other and free, the truth of humanity is perceived. We are creatures, and our awareness of our limitations comes as we gaze upon the Creator.

The outcome of being confronted by the mystery of God is that humanity is provoked to worship. As humanity receives God’s gracious revelation, we are led to respond in wonder and awe as we praise God. Calvin’s theology is intended to guide the church to respond to God in worship. The presence and power of this God cause an immediate change in the human who is encountered, changing their self-understanding and way of perceiving the world. Humanity is not capable of full comprehension of God. Rather, it is created to contemplate, fear and enjoy God who makes Himself known. Seeking the knowledge of God is about being drawn into a deeper meditation of God’s work through which God wills to be known. Calvin uses the word “piety” to describe the disposition required to receive this knowledge of God. Piety is reverence and love in response to God’s gracious provision.

Calvin describes creation as a theatre where humanity can be a spectator of divine glory and be drawn to contemplate God’s grandeur. He writes that “wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory.”

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3 Ibid., I.ii.2.
4 Ibid., I.i.3.
5 Ibid., I.i.1.
6 Ibid., I.v.9.
7 Ibid., I.ii.1.
8 Ibid., I.v.2.
9 Ibid., I.v.1.
Calvin teaches that creation abounds with testimonies to God. He believes that God wills to be known in all of creation. The witnesses to God throughout creation serve as invitations to meditate upon the wonder of God. Calvin writes that “there are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom.” The signs of God’s works throughout creation are invitations for humanity to consider God’s majesty and contemplate him in his works. They can remind humanity of God’s goodness, God’s provision and God’s sovereign governance of the universe.

Calvin explains that humanity has an innate awareness of the existence of God. He writes that awareness of divinity is “engraved on men’s minds” and this makes it impossible to ignore a natural fear of God. However, this knowledge of God is incomplete and not sufficient for us to know God. Calvin argues that even within humanity itself there is plentiful witness to God’s creative work if we have the eyes to perceive it.

Sin explains why humanity cannot perceive God. God wills to be known and leaves witnesses to Himself throughout the creation. Calvin describes us as living in a “workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works” and ungratefully turning away from God. God reveals Himself and his purposes to humanity in his works, however, humanity is unable and unwilling to perceive such knowledge and so “they flow away without profiting us.” Rather than being led to praise, humanity devises ways of concealing the revelation to God and refusing to acknowledge God. Superstition, idolatry, and pride cover up the witnesses to God in creation.

Sin dulls humanity’s perception of God’s self-witness in creation. Sin distorts our vision of the truth and renders us unable to attain a saving measure of the knowledge of God. Calvin introduces his discussion of sin in Book I of the *Institutes* in his teaching on the knowledge of God the Creator.

Grace is the starting point for Calvin’s theological reflection on the relationship between God and humanity. God wills to be known and creates a world in which humans can flourish.

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10 In *The Theology of John Calvin*, Karl Barth discusses whether this should be considered a natural theology. THL Parker discusses the same question in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1952).


12 Ibid., I.v.1.

13 Ibid., I.iii.1.

14 Ibid., I.iii.3.

15 Ibid., I.v.4.

16 Ibid., I.v.11.
Humanity is created in the image of God to be reliant on God who blesses us.\textsuperscript{17} However, Adam in his sin turns away. Calvin teaches that the cause of Adam’s fall was “unfaithfulness.”\textsuperscript{18} Adam did not trust God’s Word. The lack of trust led to pride, ambition, and ungratefulness. Calvin writes that “Adam would never have dared oppose God’s authority unless he had disbelieved in God’s Word.”\textsuperscript{19} Adam’s disobedience brought forth a curse that entangles humanity and all creation.\textsuperscript{20} Sin renders humanity unable to perceive God. Calvin establishes that humanity is responsible for its inability to perceive God. Sin entered the world because of Adam’s disobedience. Calvin establishes God’s gracious will to be known before turning to his discussion of sin.

Calvin understands that Adam’s disobedience infects the whole creation and corrupts humanity. The corruption is known as original sin. Calvin discusses the doctrine of original sin at the beginning of Book II of the \textit{Institutes}. Sin is the “depravation of a nature previously good and pure.”\textsuperscript{21} Calvin describes original sin as the “hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which firsts makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls ‘works of the flesh’.”\textsuperscript{22} Sin corrupts all of humanity and pervades every aspect of our being. Adam’s sin “propagates” itself through all humanity and envelopes all humanity, bringing forth more fruits of the flesh.\textsuperscript{23} Humanity is responsible for sin. God created humans so that we could worship and enjoy Him forever, but sin has “degenerated” our original condition.\textsuperscript{24}

Sin has tainted humanity’s perception so that we are unable to enjoy the relationship for which God created us. Rather than lives that are orientated toward God, humanity seeks to live on our own terms. Humanity directs its efforts to build confidence in our sufficiency and to bring honour to ourselves.\textsuperscript{25} Human attempts at self-aggrandizement distort God’s purpose in creating humanity. Despite the curse of sin humanity still longs to see and experience truth. Reason and will are a part of humanity’s nature. Humanity still has the power to exercise reason and to seek after truth, but our perception is distorted and dulled by sin. Calvin draws

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., II.i.1.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., II.i.4.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., II.i.5.  
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., II.i.8.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., II.i.9.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., II.i.2.
attention to John 1:5 “the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not” to demonstrate that humanity can still see, but cannot understand the light because it is “choked with the dense ignorance” of sin.\(^\text{26}\) Humanity has a perception problem. Calvin teaches that humanity seeks truth in its immediate context without reference to the knowledge of God or God’s judgement. Calvin maintains a positive view of humanity’s capacity to understand things that do not pertain to the Kingdom of God. He argues that the human mind retains its capacity to explore and understand human things and to organise social life.\(^\text{27}\) Calvin teaches that the arts and science are gifts from God which humanity can still exercise through the gift of the Spirit.\(^\text{28}\) However, concerning the knowledge that leads to salvation, human reason and capacity reach their limit. Sin has destroyed the capacity to recognise truth, and so humanity continually gropes in the darkness.\(^\text{29}\)

The spiritual knowledge required for salvation is to know God, to know God’s favour and gifts of salvation and to live life according to God’s will.\(^\text{30}\) Since sin entered the world humanity has no access to this saving knowledge.\(^\text{31}\) Without the intervention of God humanity cannot attain this spiritual knowledge.\(^\text{32}\) Human sin and its inability to know God means that only God can impart the knowledge of God. Calvin writes “it therefore remains for us to understand that the Kingdom of God is open only to him whose minds has been made new by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”\(^\text{33}\)

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Humanity can know God because God wills to be known. Calvin teaches that the Holy Spirit is the active agent in revelation. In the *Institutes* Calvin cites a range of texts that teach that human knowledge of God depends on the work of God.\(^\text{34}\) In order to appreciate God’s will to be known it is necessary to reflect on the central role that Calvin ascribes to the Holy Spirit. This means that the exploration of Calvin’s understanding of revelation takes place within the context of the doctrine of God. Calvin’s account of the knowledge of God rests on an implicit

\(^{26}\) Ibid., II.i.12.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid., II.ii.13.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., II.ii.16.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., II.ii.12.  
\(^{30}\) Ibid., II.i.18.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid., II.vi.1.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid., II.ii.18.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid., II.ii.20.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
Trinitarian theology which permeates his work. This section will unfold this by describing Calvin’s account of the Spirit and the Trinitarian shape of the Spirit’s work.

The Trinitarian logic of the Christian faith shapes Calvin’s teaching.\(^{35}\) Calvin’s account of the Trinity defends the received orthodoxy of the church and demonstrates that the Trinity is the biblically appropriate way to understand God. Calvin demonstrates from Scripture that God has one essence and presents Himself as three persons (hypostasis). Recognising the different way that hypostasis has been connected to the word essence, he makes it clear that the essence of God cannot be divided. Whilst Scripture bears witness to the unity of God, Calvin notes that the testimony of the apostles also bears witness to three hypostases in God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.\(^{36}\) Calvin directs his detailed knowledge of patristic and medieval theology against anti-Trinitarian thinkers such as Michael Servetus.\(^{37}\) Calvin surveys the different words the tradition has used in the doctrine of the Trinity and discusses its strengths and weaknesses. He argues that the language of “subsistence” is the preferable translation which allows for the distinction of each person of the Trinity while maintaining one essence. Calvin notes the extrabiblical language that is employed in the doctrine of the Trinity and argues that such theological terms allow the church to articulate and defend the doctrine that leads to the knowledge of God.\(^{38}\) Calvin’s treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity is consistent with the church’s teachings on the doctrine.\(^{39}\) Whilst the section dealing directly with the Trinity is comparatively short within *Institutes*, Calvin’s theology demonstrates a Trinitarian logic where the Father, Son and Spirit are active agents in the work of creation and redemption.

Calvin account of the divinity of the Holy Spirit is based on the Scriptures. Calvin demonstrates that the Scripture witness that the Spirit as God. He cites 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19 and 2 Corinthians 6:16 where Paul speaks of the “Spirit of God.” Calvin emphasises that this language makes clear the Spirit is not to be understood as part of creation, but as divine.\(^{40}\) Calvin writes that “the Spirit exists hypostatically in God” and leaves no doubt that the Spirit is God.\(^{41}\)

\(^{36}\) Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xiii.2.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 122 (footnote).
\(^{38}\) Ibid., I.xiii.4.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., I.xiii.2.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., I.xiii.15.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., I.xiii.14.
Calvin also offers a functional account of the Spirit’s divinity. He teaches that Scripture portrays the Spirit undertaking tasks that are only possible for God. The Spirit is divine because the Spirit’s work is divine work. Calvin draws attention to Scripture’s witness to the Spirit’s work in the creation and preservation of the universe. Creation is an activity of God. As the Spirit was involved in creating, the Spirit should, therefore, be considered divine. Calvin also points to the Spirit’s involvement in prophetic inspiration, teaching the church, leading humanity to salvation, the work of sanctification and drawing humanity into communion with God. These works of the Spirit are “functions that especially belong to divinity.” As the Spirit is undertaking these, Calvin teaches that we must understand the Spirit as God.

In Calvin’s teaching, the Spirit is the guide of the church. Humanity’s reception of the knowledge of God is a work of the Holy Spirit. The knowledge of God the Creator and God the Redeemer is the knowledge of salvation. Whilst the work of Jesus Christ is the central feature of Calvin’s theology, the work of Christ and the Spirit are inseparable. Calvin states that without the work of the Holy Spirit “nothing is accomplished” by Christ’s teaching. We need to discuss Christ’s work to understand the role that the Spirit plays in leading the church to the transforming and saving knowledge of God.

Jesus is the great mediator between God and humanity. We have seen that Calvin’s account of sin shows that Adam’s sin makes it impossible for humanity to attain the saving knowledge of God. Sin opened a gulf between God and humanity. Humans cannot cross this gulf. God the Father freely chooses to send the Son and the Spirit to bring salvation. Jesus is true God and true man in Calvin’s teaching. God can only overcome the estrangement between God and humanity. God became flesh and dwelt amongst us as our Redeemer. It is only through the work of the Son that the knowledge of God the Creator becomes useful for humanity. Without Christ, humanity cannot profit from the universe. Christ became human to act on humanity’s behalf and in Adam’s stead before the Father. In Christ, we are called to faith, and we are

42 Ibid.
43 It is interesting to note the similarity of this argument is to Basil’s argument for the Spirit’s divinity in On the Holy Spirit. Calvin does not acknowledge Basil as the source of this argument, however given his reliance on Basil elsewhere it is reasonable to assume that Calvin was familiar with Basil’s teaching on the Spirit.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., II.ii.20.
47 Ibid., II.vi.1.
48 Ibid., II.xii.3.
enabled to see God as our Father. The work of Jesus Christ leads humanity to know God, to humbly receive God’s blessings and reveals God’s intention for humanity. This is what Calvin previously described as spiritual knowledge that leads to salvation. Only God can undertake the work of restoring humanity to Himself. The work of Christ restores the relationship between God and humanity and establishes a new covenant. Humanity can call God ‘Father’ because of the work of the Son and the Spirit.

The Spirit unites us to the saving work of Jesus Christ. In Book III of the *Institutes* Calvin begins by stating that we need to be united to Christ to receive the blessings of his saving work. Calvin writes “to share with us what he received from the Father, he had to become ours and dwell within us.” This means, in the language of the New Testament, to be engrafted to Christ (Rom 11:17), to put on Christ (Gal 3:27), and to grow into him who is our head (Eph 4:15). This union with Christ is obtained through faith which is a work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin rejects the idea that faith is intellectual assent, acceptance of a particular understanding of history or human achievement. Calvin consistently teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation. Faith is a gift received as the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of Christians. Calvin writes that the Spirit leads us to faith with “a testimony we feel engraved like a seal on our hearts, with the result that it seals the cleansing and sacrifice of Christ.”

The starting point for understanding faith is not human thinking, but the gracious work of God who reveals his intentions for humanity to receive His benefits. Calvin defines faith as “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” This is a Trinitarian account of faith where the Spirit works with the Son to bring people to the Father.

**Holy Scripture**

The saving and revelatory work of the Spirit through which we are united to Jesus Christ provides the context for understanding the nature and function of Scripture. God is sovereign and free and uses Scripture as an authoritative witness to God. Calvin writes that through

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49 Ibid., II.i.18.
50 Ibid., III.i.1.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., II.i.1.
53 Ibid., II.ii.7.
54 Ibid., I.vi.1.
Scripture, God instructs the church and “opens his most hallowed lips.” Scripture is a guide to direct the church to God. Calvin teaches that Scripture is used by God to reveal His promises and his benevolence.

Calvin teaches that the authority of Scripture comes from the Spirit of God. The testimony of the Spirit enables both the production and reception of Scripture. Although the prophets and apostles wrote the text of Scripture, the authority of the words of Scripture derives from the work of the Holy Spirit rather than of the human authors. Calvin suggests that the human writers had faith that the doctrines that were “engraved on their hearts” proceeded from God. Although Calvin is not specific, his logic suggests that the authors’ faith and certainty is the work of the Holy Spirit. The witness of Scripture is not limited to the historical context of their production. Calvin teaches that God intends that Scripture would provide a witness to the truth of God that would be available throughout the ages. The Spirit enlivens the texts to speak to God’s people across time and space. Calvin recognises that human agency in the production of the Scripture but does not assign a revelatory function to the Scripture apart from the work of the Holy Spirit as this would undermine the sovereignty of God.

Scripture can only be received as the Word of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the vehicle that the Spirit uses to reveal God to humanity, and it is only by the Spirit’s work that the Word can be received. Calvin writes that “the Word will not find any acceptance in men’s hearts before it sealed by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit.” Calvin acknowledges that the authority of Scripture is a self-authenticating argument. Scripture is not required to conform to human reason but comes to us on God’s terms. Calvin writes that the “highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.” This argument rests on the logic of the self-disclosure of the Triune God. It is important to note that Calvin is not seeking to appeal to sceptics who reject Scripture. His audience is Reformed Christians who accept the authority of Scripture. Therefore, the readers are pious recipients who are accepting the gracious gift of the knowledge of God which the

55 Ibid., I.VI.1.
57 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, I.vii.4.
58 Ibid., I.vi.2.
59 Ibid., I.vii.4.
60 Ibid.
Spirit imparts. Accordingly, Calvin’s understanding of Scripture and human knowledge of God rests upon the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin teaches that the authority of Scripture derives from the authority of God. The authority of Scripture was a significant debate in the Reformation. The authority of Scripture is a central tenet of Reformed teaching. Calvin’s writing is part of the questioning of traditional understandings of how God exercises authority in the church that characterised the Reformation. Calvin argues on the basis of Scripture that God exercises authority in the church through the witness of Scripture. This circular argument rests on Calvin’s location of revelation and Scripture within the doctrine of God. In order to establish the authority of Scripture, Calvin draws on the sovereignty of God to correct what he considers are two misunderstandings of how authority was being exercised in the church; the Roman church’s appeal to testimony, and the “Fanatics” appeal to the inspiration of the Spirit.

Calvin writes against those who argue that the Scripture’s authority derives from the consent of the church. If the decree of the church formed the canon, then the authority of Scripture would be secondary to the authority of the church.\(^\text{61}\) This would mean that human knowledge of God was mediated by human authority rather than the sovereign work of the Spirit. This is not consistent with Calvin’s understanding of the sovereignty of God, nor his teaching on the gulf between humanity and God which is overcome at God’s initiative. Calvin draws on Ephesians 2:20 and argues that if the teaching of the apostles and prophets is foundational for the church, it cannot be the church’s decree that establishes the authority of the Scripture. Instead, the church “receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures.”\(^\text{62}\) This means that the very existence of the church, and the church’s reception of Scripture, is a response to the prevenient work of God. Calvin acknowledges that there is not an external basis for this validity of Scripture but that it is established by faith, which is a gift of the Spirit. It is on the basis of God’s sovereignty that Calvin insists on the authority of Scripture over the church.

Calvin turns his attention to those he terms the “Fanatics” who argue that the Spirit speaks outside of the witness to Scripture. Although Calvin regards revelation as the work of the Spirit, he rejects the Fanatics teaching that this takes place in isolation from Scripture. The reception of God’s revelation requires the inner working of the Spirit. However, this does not mean that revelation is wholly subjective. Calvin argues that Scripture leads to salvation by

\(^{61}\) Ibid., I.vii.1.  
\(^{62}\) Ibid., I.vii.2.
impacting the saving knowledge of God. Believers receive this knowledge in faith. The work of the Spirit is not to reveal new doctrine but to seal and confirm the doctrine contained within the Scripture. There is a bond between the Spirit and the Word. The Spirit leads us to contemplate God whom we encounter in the Word. The Word is not given as a temporary witness to be later replaced by the Spirit. Rather, the Word is given so that the Spirit might interpret and bring the church to the knowledge of God. He writes that the Word is “like a mirror in which faith may contemplate God.” Calvin’s argument against the “Fanatics” establishes the authority of God over any human reason or experience. Knowledge of God is only attainable through God’s work in the Holy Spirit who enlivens Scripture for the church.

Calvin establishes the teaching of Scripture as the supreme standard in the church’s life. Against the Roman church on one side and the Fanatics on the other, Calvin uses the Scripture as a basis against which to test the various claims of tradition and experience. Calvin demonstrates a deep engagement with the church’s tradition. However, he is happy to reject tradition if he considers that it is not in accordance with Scripture. Likewise, Calvin’s understanding of the Spirit’s work in interpreting Scripture has a certain subjectivity to it but establishes Scripture as the baseline against which to test experience. Calvin’s location of revelation and Scripture within the doctrine of God establishes Scripture, rather than tradition or experience, as the supreme standard for the church’s doctrine and life and gives authority to the whole Reformation project.

John Webster helpfully uses the language of sanctification to describe how Scripture functions in theology. In his book *Holy Scripture. A Dogmatic Sketch* Webster describes Scripture as a creaturely reality God uses as a part of his saving purposes. The language of sanctification holds the divine work the texts accomplish and their creaturely origin in tension. It serves to create a “middle ground” which recognises the human authors of the text and the Spirit’s work to “set apart” the Scripture as a tool of divine self-communication. Though Calvin does not use this language to describe the relationship between the Spirit and Scripture, Webster effectively summarises Calvin’s teaching on the unique work that God performs through the Spirit in revealing Godself through Scripture.

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63 Ibid., I.ix.1.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., II.i.6.
67 Ibid., 9.
Holy Scripture reveals the knowledge of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. The reader is addressed by God when Scripture is opened and read. The content of this address is Jesus Christ who brings the believer to the Father. The Spirit who inspired the Word is also at work in the heart of the reader. God, who stands at the centre of Calvin’s theology, remains an uncontainable mystery. Scripture serves the purposes of God by enabling participation in the saving knowledge of God. Calvin likens Scripture to “spectacles” which clear up the confusion and “clearly shows us the true God.” The Scriptures were written by humans and sanctified for God’s purposes of drawing humanity to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the riches of God’s grace.

Calvin’s use of Scripture

We have seen that Calvin teaches that Scripture is the supreme standard for the church. All doctrine must be tested against the teaching of Scripture. Scripture is the source of our knowledge of God. Calvin desires that all Christians have access to the Scripture that they might discover the grace of God and the call to live in accordance with his will. Through Scripture, the Spirit leads the reader to the saving knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. Scripture serves to teach and order to the church’s life. Calvin longed to see Christians reading Scripture and be drawn to a knowledge of God in Christ. Calvin wrote in an ecclesial context and believed that the interpretation of Scripture belonged within the context of the church community. God provides the church with teachers and pastors and Calvin understood himself to be called to both these offices.

A key concern for Calvin was what he considered to the poverty of biblical teaching in the life of the church. Calvin felt that the leaders of the church did not have the skills to interpret Scripture for their congregations appropriately. In conjunction with the lack of catechesis for ordinary Christians, Calvin was concerned that this led to superstition and idolatry. This neglect of the Scripture led Calvin to make his significant contributions in the form of theological education and preaching.

70 Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 56.
71 Ibid., 105.
72 Ibid., 7.
73 Ibid., 11.
Calvin sought to teach doctrine and equip pastors of the church for the tasks of ministry. Teachers served the church by drawing on the Christian tradition and contemporary scholarship to expound doctrine which would lead the church to understand Scripture. Calvin writes the *Institutes* in his capacity as a teacher of the church, seeking to “instruct candidate in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word.” He believes that by following the teaching of the *Institutes* the reader will be able to understand Scripture faithfully. In the letter to the reader from the French edition of 1560, Calvin writes that “Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine, to which one can add nothing... yet a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some guidance and direction, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but to hold to a sure path, that he may always be pressing toward the end to which the Holy Spirit calls him.”

In his letter to the reader at the beginning of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin writes that “God has filled my mind with zeal to spread his Kingdom and to further the public good... that since I undertook the office of teacher in the church, I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness.” Calvin states a commitment to brief teachings that are a “sum of Christian doctrine,” and a means to understand the teachings of Scripture more clearly. As such, sustained engagement with Scripture characterises the *Institutes*. Just as Scripture cannot be reduced to a single theme, the *Institutes* is not easily reduced to a single theme. Instead, throughout the *Institutes* Calvin contemplates the mysteries of God as he interprets them in Scripture to invite the church to find its vocation of glorifying God.

The *Institutes* are a summary and defence of biblical doctrine directed to the church to help it receive God’s teachings contained in the Scripture. The *Institutes* are to be read alongside the commentaries which provide verse by verse exposition of the text, whilst the *Institutes* engage in the sustained theological reflection on the doctrine arising from Scripture. These works were printed and disseminated across Europe throughout Calvin’s lifetime and represent a significant portion of his work.

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74 Ibid., 14.
76 Ibid., 6.
77 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 8.
Calvin’s exegesis demonstrates sustained engagement with the church’s historical reception of Scripture. Although his work often contains invective against the Roman church of the day, Calvin regarded himself a recipient of the church catholic’s exegetical work. He regularly engages the Greek and Latin doctors of the church. In addition to the explicit references, Calvin demonstrates a thorough grounding in Scholastic theology and how the church has throughout the ages received Scripture. While Calvin demonstrates a comprehensive engagement with the tradition, he is willing to critique and depart from the exegesis of both the patristics and his contemporaries. The engagement with the tradition in the reception of the Scripture demonstrates Calvin’s understanding that Scripture is received in the church. It also reflects his conviction that the Spirit continues to interpret Scripture for the church.

Calvin’s education helps shape his interpretation of Scripture. Calvin education began in Noyon as a youth where he received basic instruction in the scholarly language of Latin. In 1523 Calvin departed to Paris to study at the College de la Marche. Here Calvin’s study of Latin was improved upon by the tutelage of Maturin Cordier, who was a leading humanist scholar of the day. Calvin’s studies saw him move to the College de Montaigu which was a centre of conservative theology. It is not clear what Calvin studied at Montaigu. However it is clear is that by 1528, at the instruction of his father, Calvin has moved to Orleans to study law. During this time Calvin learned Greek. Calvin’s legal studies gave him insights and skills in the civic sphere of life including legislation, property, crime and marriage. During his studies, Calvin came to believe, following Erasmus, that the classic texts needed to be interpreted in the light of their contexts. This includes the cultural, literary and linguistic context. Calvin brings all the skills gained in his humanist education as he approaches Scripture. Throughout his commentaries, Calvin uses the various tools of sixteenth century scholarship in order to enable the church to understand the Word of God contained within the

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81 Gordon, Calvin, 5.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 7.
84 Ibid., 17.
85 Ibid., 20.
86 Ibid., 22.
87 Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 15.
biblical text. Calvin use of the church’s tradition and the tools of scholarship in his exegetical work reflect his view of human reason as a gift from the Spirit which enables the church to receive the Word of God in its life.

Calvin’s education led him to engage with the classical literature of Western culture that had its roots in ancient Rome. Calvin initially desired to become a classical scholar. His earliest work was a commentary on Seneca’s *De Clementia*. Throughout Calvin’s work, he demonstrates an awareness of classical philosophers and continued to engage with them through his writings. Steinmetz argues that Calvin read Scripture in the company of his contemporaries, the tradition of the church and the classical philosophers. Calvin was hardly the first Christian teacher to engage with classical philosophy. The conversation between classical philosophy and Christian theology had been ongoing since the early church, and the Jewish communities that the church grew from. Calvin utilised the categories and perspectives offered by classical philosophy to elucidate and explain doctrinal points taught by Scripture. We see this in Calvin’s use of the Aristotelian language of cause to describe the doctrine of election in his commentary on Ephesians 1. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Holy Scripture is the primary source in Calvin’s teaching, but he is willing to use other sources in the service of expounding the teaching of Scripture.

Calvin’s understanding of the nature of Scripture is the most significant factor in shaping how he uses Scripture in his theology. Calvin regards the Scripture as revealing the saving knowledge of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin, this means all of Scripture bears witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This witness is the basis of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Calvin regards the Old Testament as nurturing the hope of salvation. Calvin writes that “by these words he teaches that while the Law serves to hold the godly in expectation of Christ’s coming, at his advent they should hope for far more light.” He argues that the Old Testament bears persistent witness to Jesus Christ, while the New Testament provides a clearer picture of God’s purposes in Jesus Christ. Calvin’s interpretation


90 Ibid., 143.

91 Ibid.

92 See Chapter 2, section 4 of this thesis.


of the Old Testament through the lens of Christ is an inter-textual interpretation of the Scripture. It reflects his understanding that all Scripture directs the church to God’s revealed purposes in Jesus Christ.⁹⁵

God’s witness in Scripture is the source of all sound doctrine. Calvin writes that “we ought to hold that it [doctrine] must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no-one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture.”⁹⁶ Calvin demonstrates a reluctance to make definitive statements about God based on anything but Scripture. We will see in our discussion of the doctrine of election in chapter 3 that Calvin is not always consistent with this instinct. He rejects extra-Scriptural speculation and argues that it is not for humans to know the hidden things of God. Instead, God speaks through Scripture to reveal to humanity what is required for salvation. The *Institutes*, as mentioned, is regarded by Calvin as a summary of Christian doctrine that is based on his exegesis. *Institutes* serve as a Scripturally based frame through which to read Scripture. The theological understanding of the nature of Scripture, the doctrinal framework of the saving work of Christ, the humanist respect for the historical text and the ecclesial location of reading Scripture shape the way Calvin reads Scripture.

Calvin’s view of the nature and function of Scripture emerges from Scripture. It reflects an understanding of reality where heaven and earth are connected through the person and work of God. This understanding of reality was commonplace in late medieval and early Reformation teaching.⁹⁷ While Calvin’s understanding of reality was not controversial, he sought to redefine how this connection was perceived. Calvin’s significant move is to place God at the centre of the connection between heaven and earth.⁹⁸ God, working through Christ and the Spirit mediates the connection between heaven and earth. Scripture serves a revelatory function because of the work of the Spirit. It is the doctrine of God that links heaven and earth together. Human life is made possible and ordered by God’s sovereign purposes which are revealed to humanity in the Father’s sending of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Humanity’s role in this process is to receive the gift that God offers.

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⁹⁵ Rae, “Calvin on the Authority of Scripture,” 93.
⁹⁸ Ibid., 39.
Calvin’s Context

Calvin’s understanding of Scripture affirms that the invisible God is continually interacting with the lived experience of humanity. The world is the place where God’s sovereign purposes are unfolding, and God’s people can enjoy His generous gifts. However, the historical context of Calvin’s work stands in contrast to the Scriptural view of reality in his teaching. A brief sketch will demonstrate this contrast. Sixteenth century Europe was in turmoil as the various movements of reform that unfolded. Substantial doctrinal and popular reform took place in Western Europe. As the settlement between the church and political power was disrupted, the implications of religious beliefs for personal, social, political and economic life resulted in significant unrest. 99 The Reformation saw wars, executions, mass refugee movements and regime change across Europe. Calvin’s own experience as a refugee, pastor, teacher and statesman illustrate that life unfolded amid a context that was marked by sin and seemed to question the sovereignty of God.

In sixteenth century Europe, life was precarious. Europe’s experience of the plague in the fourteenth century, disease in crowded cities and low life expectancy meant that death was a part of the everyday consciousness. The rise of the Ottoman Empire combined with the fall of the Crusader created anxiety about the future of Christian Europe. 100 There was also significant tension between the ruling houses of Europe. Such social and political factors mean that death continually confronted people. Meditation on death and post-mortem existence played a large role in religious imagination, as evidenced by the theology and art of the period. 101

The darkened context of Calvin’s work becomes more evident as we focus on the events of his life. Calvin was born into a family closely associated with this church. His father was an official in the cathedral at Noyon, and a church benefice funded Calvin’s education. Calvin fled Paris in 1533 that was divided by religion intertwined with politics in fear of his life. 102 He was a religious refugee and relied on the hospitality of friends. Being a Protestant in this climate was dangerous. The executions and persecution that was unleashed following the Placards Affair in October 1534 and January 1535 when Protestant tracts were hung over

101 Ibid.
102 Gordon, Calvin, 35.
Paris, including the king’s door, demonstrates the danger in which French Protestants lived. It was an act of sedition to declare the Protestant faith.\textsuperscript{103} Calvin, aware of the danger he was in, departed France for Basel in 1534.

Whilst in exile in Basel Calvin was the recipient of news of the events that were unfolding in his homeland and across Western Europe.\textsuperscript{104} Zwingli, the leader of the reformed church in Zurich, was slain on the battlefield. Disputes were emerging over the Lord’s Supper. These disputes about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist were at the heart of the conflict between Lutherans and Zwinglians and prevented a united reform movement through German-speaking lands. Suspicion and distrust marked the relationships between reform movements.

Despite Calvin’s desire for a quiet, scholarly life, he could not escape the harsh and precarious nature of the sixteenth century context. Calvin faced significant threats during his ministry in Geneva. During his first sojourn in Geneva (1536-38), Pierre Caroli accused Calvin of non-Trinitarian teachings – a charge that carried the penalty of death. Elections for the Small Council were held in 1538 and further exposed the precarious nature of Calvin’s ministry in Geneva. Unexpectedly, the party supporting reform lost. Calvin found himself on the outer, identified as a trouble maker and he fled the city. By the time he was invited back to Geneva to serve as its chief minister, Calvin had been involved in international negotiations, witnessed and heard reports of wars unfolding. As he served in Geneva, he acted as a local politician, international negotiator, teacher and pastor – fully engaged with the sixteenth century context which was characterised by uncertainty, danger and death.

Geneva experienced rapid change through the sixteenth century. The independence from the house of Savoy, the political settlements with Berne which enabled a degree of independence and the profile of Calvin’s reformation contributed to a city in tumult as the political, religious and social fabric was transformed. As a pastor, Calvin was engaged in the experience of the day to day lives of the people of Geneva.\textsuperscript{105} He preached multiple times a week in French, as well as lecturing fellow pastors in Latin.\textsuperscript{106} The pastoral ministry included preaching as well as engagement in church discipline. Calvin’s work as a pastor meant that he was engaged with

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{105} See Elsie McKee, \textit{The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin’s Geneva} (Geneve: Librairie Droz S.A., 2016) for a highly detailed account of ministry in Geneva.
the daily struggles, conflicts and indiscretions of everyday people in the city of Geneva. The city also experienced a large influx of predominantly French-speaking refugees. The lead role played by these refugees was often a cause of strife and disagreement in Geneva. Conditions in the city were cramped, lacking privacy, and disagreements and conflict were frequent.

Calvin interprets the context through the lens of Scripture. Despite all the challenges, difficulties and risks of the present context, Calvin regards the world as the creation of the sovereign God. The evil that humans experience is the consequence of sin. In his pastoral and teaching work, Calvin demonstrates that God directs the Gospel to our context. The Gospel offers a perspective beyond what is available through observing the context alone. The work of the Spirit, speaking through Scripture, opens the eyes of the believer to the reality of God’s sovereignty over all creation and instructs the church in how to live in accordance with God’s will. In Calvin’s writings, he addresses the immediate concerns of the contexts and offers a perspective that is shaped and schooled by his interpretation of Scripture. We often see this in his dedicatory epistles. An example of this is that the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* was dedicated to the king of France to show the king that the evangelical faith was not seditious as claimed and to demonstrate that the king had nothing to fear from the Protestants who were seeking to be faithful to the teachings of Scripture.

The sovereignty of God is an essential characteristic of Calvin’s theology and determines how he perceives reality. The purpose of all things is found in the church’s glorification of the Father as the Spirit unites us to Christ. Calvin’s work as a teacher and a pastor was work begins with this Scriptural insight and engages his context on the basis that the fulfilment of God’s promises is yet to come. Calvin’s understanding of the connectedness of heaven and earth does not allow for accounts of the Christian faith that are abstracted from life. The doctrine of election and the sovereignty of God play a role in how Calvin gives an account of the tension between the present context and the revealed purposes of the sovereign God that constitute reality.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that Calvin’s understanding of the doctrine of God determines his approach to Scripture. Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God argues that God graciously reveals Himself to humanity. Due to sin humanity’s perception is distorted

107 Ibid., 69–72.
and so cannot attain the knowledge of God. The overcoming of sin is a salvific work undertaken by the Triune God, as the Father sends the Son and the Spirit to mediate between God and humanity. Freed from the curse of sin humanity can perceive the world accurately. The work of the Holy Spirit is central to this work. The Spirit unites the believer to the work of Christ, gives the gift of faith and seals God’s promises. Scripture is a creaturely tool which is utilised by the Spirit in fulfilling God’s salvific purposes. The Spirit inspires the words of Scripture, enlivens Scripture for the church and through the Spirit God speaks to the church. The revelation of the sovereign purposes of God gives rise to questions of human life. How do humans live according to the reality of God’s sovereignty rather than the present context? How do humans come to trust and love God? How do humans enjoy the benefits that come from God? Much of the Institutes is concerned with exploring the nature of this connection and meditating upon these questions. Calvin teaches the church to lift its gaze to God through the teachings of Scripture. In chapter 2 we will explore Calvin’s teachings on Ephesians 1 as he calls the church to fix its eyes upon Christ.
Chapter 2 – Election in Calvin’s Exegesis of Ephesians 1

We have seen that Calvin teaches that Scripture is the primary source for the church’s teachings. Calvin directs the church to receive the teachings of Scripture and shape its life accordingly. As we engage with Calvin’s exegetical work on Ephesians 1, we will see Calvin putting this teaching into practice. Calvin believes that God speaks through the words of Scripture to draw people to the saving knowledge of God. Calvin offers a calm and blissful vision of God’s sovereign purposes which often belie the harshness of the context of his work. Calvin does not ignore the context; instead, he calls Christians and the church to frame their lives according to the teachings of Holy Scripture.

The letter to the Ephesians proclaims that God has chosen the church before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love (Eph 1:4). God’s gracious decision is known as election. In his commentary and sermons on Ephesians Calvin explores the theological and pastoral significance of God’s election. Calvin teaches that God’s election is the source of the church’s blessing and essential for the church to understand salvation. It is the starting point for understanding salvation. Calvin’s presentation of the doctrine of election in his exegesis of Ephesians 1 ensures that salvation is understood as a work of the sovereign God. As he unfolds Ephesians 1, Calvin instructs the church to lift its eyes above the present context to the truth of God’s sovereign purposes that are taught by the Spirit in the Scripture. This chapter will introduce Calvin’s expository work on Ephesians 1 and discuss the Trinitarian logic of Calvin’s exposition of Ephesians 1. We will turn to Calvin’s teaching on the doctrine of election in Ephesians 1 and discuss the function of the doctrine of election in the commentaries and sermons on Ephesians. We will then explore two modern exegetes’ criticism of Calvin’s exegesis and question whether Calvin was consistent with his own teaching on God’s sovereignty and the nature and function of Scripture.

Calvin’s Expositions of Ephesians 1

Calvin wrote a commentary and preached on the Epistle to the Ephesians. The commentary and sermons allow us to see Calvin’s use of Scripture as both a teacher and a pastor of the church. Calvin’s commentary on Ephesians was published together with his commentary on Galatians, Philippians and Colossians in 1555. They are a revised version of the 1548
The commentaries were written for pastors to equip them for the task of ministering to their congregations through preaching and pastoral care by enabling them to understand the teachings of Ephesians clearly. Calvin sought to help the reader understand the biblical text with “lucid brevity.” The commentaries were written as a resource for the pastor in the preparation of sermons in their specific contexts. The practical implications of the biblical passages are left to the pastor to discern (in prayer, conversation and pastoral work) for the context in which they were serving.

Calvin teaches that God’s intent is that the letter to the Ephesians would guide the church by the work of the Spirit. Although the text was written to a specific congregation in Ephesus, Calvin teaches that God intends Paul’s letter to Ephesus for the whole church. Calvin demonstrates an awareness of the historic location of the Ephesians epistle. He offers a brief introduction in the commentary and describes the city in Asia Minor and the establishment of the church. He tells his congregation that “God meant that they should serve not only for one time alone, or for certain people only, but forever, and in general for the whole church.” Calvin goes on to preach that “the doctrine contained in this epistle is directed and dedicated to us at this present day.” He preaches in his first sermon on Ephesians that “it was the intention and purpose of the Holy Spirit to exhort to perseverance” those who are in Jesus Christ. The witness of the apostle Paul is taken by the Spirit and used to teach and enlighten the church and lead it to the assurance that God speaks to the church through Christ in the Scripture.

Scripture’s teaching is directed to believers and congregations in the present context. We see Calvin’s engagement with the present context in his dedicatory epistle. Calvin dedicates the commentary to the Ephesians to a prince in the Holy Roman Empire who has sympathies for the Protestant movement. Lord Christopher, Duke of Wirtemberg and Count of Montbeliard faced significant pressure from Charles V to remain a part of the Holy Roman Empire. Calvin

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2 Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 147.
4 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 121.
5 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 7.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 Ibid., 13.
8 Ibid., 10.
9 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1.
writes that he hopes that the Duke might be “confirmed” and that in the midst of the troubled times turning to Scripture would provide the Duke with comfort and consolation.\textsuperscript{10} In the commentary, Calvin recognises that the letter was initially addressed to the “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.”\textsuperscript{11} Calvin’s teaching on the reception of the teaching of Scripture is consistent with his understanding of the nature and function of Scripture discussed in chapter 1.

Throughout the commentary on Ephesians Calvin broadly engages with the patristic and contemporary interpretation of the text. He engages with John Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Cyprian and Jerome amongst patristic teachers. He also references sixteenth century teachers such as Erasmus, Luther and Zwingli. Calvin also defends his interpretations against those the tradition regards as heretical including the Pelagian, Manichean and Marcionite heresies. He also engages polemically against the “sophists of Sorbonne,” who represent the Roman excesses that Calvin was protesting.\textsuperscript{12} Calvin’s intended audience was an educated reader with a comprehensive knowledge of Scripture and the church catholic’s tradition. We noted earlier that he assumes that the commentary would be read alongside the \textit{Institutes} and his other biblical commentaries.\textsuperscript{13} Calvin reads Ephesians in the context of the whole witness of Scripture and regularly draws on other Old and New Testament writings. Calvin assumes that the reader is familiar with Greek and often explains alternative translations to important words.

Calvin also understood himself as called to the office of pastor.\textsuperscript{14} Pastors carried out the task of preaching. Preaching is a characteristic feature of the Reformed church. Scripture is the supreme standard for the church’s life, and as such, it needs to be regularly expounded for the congregation. In Geneva biblical exposition was the norm in every worship service.\textsuperscript{15} The reformers believe that Scripture determined the content and the shape of the sermon. This means preaching followed the order of the text and preachers work their way through a particular book.\textsuperscript{16} Calvin preached forty-eight sermons on the Epistle the Ephesians beginning

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 123.
\item \textsuperscript{12} For an account of Calvin’s historic and present engagement with the Roman church see Randall Zachmann (ed), \textit{John Calvin and Roman Catholicism: Critique and Engagement, Then and Now} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).
\item \textsuperscript{13} Zachman, \textit{John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian}, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Zachman, \textit{John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian}, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{15} McKee, “A Week in the Life of John Calvin,” 62.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 63.
\end{itemize}
During the period Calvin preached from Ephesians on Sundays; his weekday sermons were from Isaiah. Since Calvin regarded preaching and teaching as two distinct tasks, his sermons are notably different in terms of style and focus than his commentaries. In his sermons on Ephesians, Calvin offers practical implications of the doctrine of election. Randall Zachman describes Calvin’s intention in preaching as showing what the original author meant and explaining the practical implications so that believers might apply it to their own lives. For Calvin preaching is the key to how Christians participate in the Gospel. Calvin writes that in preaching, the “goodness of God flows out to us.” Calvin describes this as a “double grace” in which preachers are raised up and that we can receive the Word as it is preached. Calvin’s sermons are addressed to the ordinary people of his congregation to enable them to understand and apply God’s Word in their lives. This chapter will draw on both Calvin’s commentary and sermons in order to gain a fuller appreciation of how Calvin understands the teachings of Ephesians 1.

The Trinitarian Logic of Ephesians 1

In his teaching and preaching from Ephesians 1, Calvin invites us to ponder the God who has created and redeemed the world. He directs us to consider what this means for human life. The Trinitarian logic of Calvin’s teaching is evident throughout his exposition of Ephesians 1. This section will describe the Trinitarian pattern of Calvin’s exposition through reference to both the commentary and sermons. We will see that Calvin teaches that the Father, Son and Spirit are all engaged in salvation.

Paul opens the letter to the Ephesians by identifying himself as an apostle. In the commentary, Calvin explains Paul’s use of the language ‘apostle’ and how this should be understood as part of God’s salvific purposes. An apostle is a specific ministry in the life of the church. Calvin directs the reader to his comments on the term in the letter to the Galatians. Paul’s use of the title apostle appeals to the authority of God. An apostle was

17 Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, vi.
18 Ibid., viii.
19 Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 147.
20 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 128.
21 Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 127.
23 The intention of this chapter is to explore Calvin’s reading of Ephesians 1. As such, I will not be engaging in the contemporary debates of Pauline authorship or Ephesians reception of the letter. I will use Calvin’s understanding of Pauline authorship.
24 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 123.
25 Ibid., 8.
appointed uniquely by God through the call of Jesus. This is a separate office than that of a pastor who is elected to their charge, and therefore subject to human authority. In claiming apostleship, Paul emphasises that his teachings do not originate with himself, but are from God. The source and the content of apostolic vocation is God. Paul is sent to proclaim and teach what Jesus Christ has revealed. It is the authority of God that makes Paul’s teaching authoritative.

In his sermon on Ephesians 1:1-3 Calvin emphasises that in claiming apostleship, Paul urges us to lift our gaze from the human messenger and to look upon God who bestows life. Calvin’s sermon explains that it is not the clever teachings of people that shape the church, but God’s Word that orders the church’s life. Calvin preached that “our Lord Jesus Christ is the only master from whom we must learn, for it is witnessed of him from heaven that it is only he and no other to whom we must listen. It has always been God’s will to keep the guiding of the church to Himself.” Calvin shows that Scripture teaches us to lift our gaze to God.

As Calvin expounds Scripture, he directs us to God who is speaking through the text. God alone can reveal truth through the communicative work of Jesus Christ. This follows a Trinitarian logic. Calvin preached that “Jesus is ordained in the place of God His Father, it is because he is God manifested in the flesh, and the infallible truth itself.” Further, he adds that “Jesus Christ was purposely sent to be our last teacher.” Jesus teaches on the initiative of the Father so that humanity might have wisdom without fault. Paul’s prayer that the Ephesians might have a spirit of wisdom and the enlightenment is to be understood in a Trinitarian fashion. Understanding is a gift of God by the Holy Spirit who brings the believer to Jesus Christ (Eph 1:17). The work of the Spirit is to enable the believer to participate in the Gospel of Christ. As we have seen in chapter 1, the Spirit’s work reveals God and Scripture are used as a lens to enable the Christian to perceive the world correctly. In his exegesis of the opening passages of Ephesians 1, Calvin consistently directs us to the Triune God.

The content of Paul’s teaching is inseparable from the God who called him. In Ephesians 1 Paul writes to the Ephesians about the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Salvation follows a

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26 Ibid., 9.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 9.
distinctively Trinitarian pattern. Paul writes that the Ephesians were “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13) which is a pledge of our inheritance. The work of the Spirit makes the salvific work of Christ effective in the life of the church and enables the church to give glory to God. This sealing work of the Spirit happens when the Ephesians had heard the word of truth and believed. It is important to remember that in Calvin’s teaching the proclamation and reception of the Gospel can only occur by the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin preached that “faith is a special gift which is not bestowed upon all” and comes only from the Holy Spirit. Paul’s authority as a teacher of the church is subordinate to the sovereignty of the God who is revealed in the saving work of Jesus Christ and ongoing work of the Spirit. Calvin explains Paul’s use of the phrase “the Beloved” (Eph 1:6) using Trinitarian logic. Calvin teaches that designating Christ as “the Beloved” describes the relationship between the Father and the Son. Calvin preaches that this title is drawn from biblical texts such as Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:3), the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:22) and Isaiah 43:4. It is a title that is particular to Jesus and describes the love between the Son and the Father. Calvin describes the implications of this relationship for his congregation. He preaches that due to sin humanity is held in enmity by God and that Jesus alone amongst humanity can be described as “the beloved.” Jesus enjoys the love of the Father and extends that love to humanity when we are incorporated into his body by the work of the Spirit. The love of God is poured out to humanity through the love that the Father has for the Son. The Trinitarian logic of Calvin’s teaching is evident as the Son and the Spirit work together to enable the believer to enjoy the benefits of God’s blessings.

At the heart of the Gospel is the love of God. Commenting on Ephesians 1:3 Calvin writes the “full certainty of salvation consists in the fact that through the Gospel God reveals his love for us in Christ.” The word love is used to describe several relationships. Paul writes about God’s love being shown to the church (Eph 2:4), the love between the Father and the Son

31 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 131.  
32 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 69.  
33 Ibid., 45.  
34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid., 46.  
36 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 127.  
37 Ibid., 124.
(Eph 1:6), the church’s love toward God (Eph 1:4), and love of the Ephesians toward the saints (Eph 1:15).

The love of God which humanity experiences is an act of grace. It is received not because of anything within human nature, but because God is “willing to cast his eye upon our Lord Jesus Christ and not look at us at all.” In love, God chooses to redeem. Redemption occurs through the union of the believer with Jesus Christ. Calvin writes that through Jesus Christians enjoy forgiveness of sins, righteousness and freedom from the bonds of the devil. In the fourth sermon on Ephesians, Calvin explains the reconciling work of Jesus. He teaches that ransom and redemption bring about the forgiveness of sin. This a freely given gift, though Calvin reminds us that it “cost the Son of God very dear.” Calvin writes that the death of Christ appeases the Father toward us. The chasm between God and humanity is overcome in Christ. The sin which had been a barrier between God and humankind is overcome as God’s kindness overflows toward us.

The Christians life is modelled after God’s love. Commenting on “in love” in Ephesians 1:4 Calvin indicates his preference to interpret this as referring to the character and shape of the life Christians are called to live. He acknowledges that it can equally be interpreted to refer to God’s love that led him to elect. Calvin believes that it offers a vision of the shape of the life of Christian’s. Calvin writes that the “perfection of believers consists in love… that it is an evidence of the fear of God and of obedience to the whole Law.” Calvin instructs the church shape its life according to the revealed love of God.

Calvin’s exegesis of Ephesians 1 is attentive to the eschatological character of the Gospel. The fulfilment of God’s promises in Christ needs to be understood using Trinitarian logic. Paul teaches that Father gathers all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Eph 1:10). Calvin explains that outside Christ all things were upset and disordered. In Christ, they are correctly ordered as we are incorporated into Christ’s body. Calvin interprets Eph 1:10 “things in heaven and things on earth” as referring to angelic beings. Calvin teaches that the angelic

38 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 52.
39 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 128.
40 Ibid.
41 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 51.
42 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 128.
43 Ibid., 136.
44 Ibid., 126.
45 Ibid., 129.
beings are part of the created order and without the work of the mediator are liable to fall. Whilst the specific interpretation of angelic beings is open to debate, Calvin hints at the eschatological nature of this teaching. He describes this gathering in the future tense, suggesting that it is an event that is to come. God’s gathering of all things is an eschatological vision of the created world – seen and unseen – being restored in Jesus Christ.

Despite the grand promises of salvation, as Calvin exegetes Ephesians 1 he is mindful that the benefits of Christ are not readily available for the church. He teaches that in many ways believers are worse off than those in the world, and that sin is still a force that works within us and the world. Without the work of the Spirit, it remains impossible to see beyond the power of sin. The cross of Jesus strongly conditions Calvin’s eschatology. Citing 2 Corinthians 12:9, Calvin writes that the “power of God is made perfect in weakness.” As believers live this life, they cannot expect to be exempt from the struggles and implications of sin. However, by the Holy Spirit, the church can look upon Jesus and ponder the wonder of God’s promise in which we participate.

Christians participate in the cosmic vision of salvation that is offered in Ephesians 1 by the Holy Spirit. God’s grace is the reason that Christians are called to participate in the Gospel. Calvin preaches that “we can have no part or lot in our Lord Jesus Christ, or in any of the benefits he has purchased for us, except God put us in possession of our salvation by his Holy Spirit.” Calvin’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God can lead to the perception that human beings are passive recipients of salvation. However, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit unites Christians to the life of Jesus and transforms the life of the Christian. The Holy Spirit is the seal of salvation and represents the ongoing work of God in the life of the believer.

At his best, Calvin’s exegesis follows a Trinitarian pattern which establishes the identity of the God who is engaging with the created world as Father, Son and Spirit. In his teachings on Ephesian 1, the Trinitarian understanding of God directs us to the goodness and grace of God who invites us to union with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Though as we explore Calvin’s commentary and sermons, we will see that Calvin was not always consistent with this logic. As Calvin explores the doctrine of election, his presentation of the work of Christ suggests that the Son is a passive instrument that serves the Father’s eternal decree. It is worth

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 124.
48 Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 70.
considering in this matter whether Calvin was consistent with his teaching on the Trinitarian and eschatological framing of our perception.

Ephesians 1 and the Doctrine of Election

Calvin describes election as the “fount” from where all the blessings the church enjoys flow.\(^{49}\) Calvin teaches that election refers to God’s free decision to predestine some to salvation, and others to damnation. In the *Institutes* Calvin summarises election writing “all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.” \(^{50}\) He intends to emphasise that salvation is entirely a work of God and that human beings are recipients of divine grace. In his second sermon on Ephesians 1, Calvin preaches that “we shall never know where our salvation comes from till we have lifted up our minds to God’s eternal counsel by which he has chosen whom he pleased and left the remainder in their confusion and ruin.” \(^{51}\) This section will outline Calvin’s doctrine of election and explore its theological and pastoral functions as it is presented in his commentary and sermons on Ephesians 1. This will enable us to see that whilst Ephesians 1 contains a doctrine of election, Calvin’s articulation of the doctrine is open to criticism.

Before exploring Calvin’s teachings on election in Ephesians 1, it is helpful to comment on the intent of the doctrine and its place in Calvin’s broader teaching. He believes that election describes God’s gracious engagement with humanity. In establishing the doctrine, Calvin hopes to enable reflection on the “infinite goodness of God, [which] stirs us up to give thanks.” \(^{52}\) Calvin intent is on directing the church to the goodness it has received from God. However, critics argue that Calvin’s doctrine of election bears witness to a monstrous God.\(^{53}\) Calvin acknowledges that many find the doctrine to be uncomfortable stating that there are those “who dread and avoid the doctrine of predestination as an inextricable labyrinth, who regard it as useless and poisonous.” \(^{54}\) Calvin was particularly sensitive to the reaction to his teaching that God saves some and rejects the rest. In response, Calvin argues that God is sovereign and therefore not bound to human judgement.\(^{55}\) He also argues that God continues

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\(^{49}\) Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 124.

\(^{50}\) Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxi.5.

\(^{51}\) Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 23.

\(^{52}\) Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 126.

\(^{53}\) John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 17.

\(^{54}\) Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 126.

\(^{55}\) Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 29.
to be generous to all through his sustenance of the creation. Calvin believes that his doctrine of election is to be faithful to the witness of Scripture and that he is faithfully laying human sensibilities and preferences to the side in obedience to God’s teaching. Calvin’s work directly enables Christians to glorify God, and he believes his doctrine of election serves this purpose. Calvin states that if the doctrine is “handled properly and soberly” it leads to a greater awareness of the goodness and grace of God.

In the *Institutes* Calvin places the doctrine of election in the context of the doctrine of justification. Book III of the *Institutes* discusses how we receive the blessings of Christ. Within Book III Calvin discusses the shape of the Christian life and teaches that our understandings of justification, sanctification, the Christian life and freedom need to be determined by Christ. As we will see in chapter three of this thesis, Calvin places the doctrine of election after his teaching on the saving work of Jesus Christ, the revealing work of the Holy Spirit and the shape of the Christian life. The location of doctrine underscores that election is not the central characteristic of Calvin’s teaching. Instead, it serves to emphasises that justification is not an individual achievement, but a freely bestowed gift of God.

The doctrine of election is directed to the church community who have gratefully received God’s abundant gift. Calvin highlights that the epistle is addressed “to the saints who are in Ephesus and who are faithful in Jesus Christ,” (Eph 1:2). He teaches that the audience of Ephesians and the doctrine it contains are people who have heard the “rudiments of the Gospel.” The Spirit works to strengthen and encourage them in their faith, through the Word of Scripture. Calvin preaches that Paul’s connection of “saints” and “faithful” illustrates the call to piety – to “give ourselves over entirely to our God and separate ourselves from the corruptions of the world.” Karl Barth echoes this in his lectures on Ephesians where he states that “to call a person holy is to say that God eternally disturbs him and fills him with joy, that God has laid his hand upon the creature.” This means that the doctrine of election is addressed to the church, and not outsiders. Calvin intends that the doctrine assure the church that it has received the free gifts of Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Election plays a key role in how Calvin understands the relationship between God and the creation. In medieval Roman Christianity, the church played a central mediating role between

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56 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 126.
58 Ibid., 14.
God and the rest of creation. Calvin’s doctrine of election and his emphasis on the sovereignty of God assigns the mediating role to Jesus Christ. Establishing Christ as mediator means that salvation is solely the work of God. Calvin’s intent is setting forth the doctrine of election is two-fold; “the magnifying of God as he deserves, and the other is the assurance of our salvation.” The theological and pastoral intentions of the doctrine are intertwined. The doctrine of election is not speculation about who is and is not saved, but instead seeks to enable the church to be confident in its salvation and in the freely given grace of God.

Calvin teaches that all the blessings humanity enjoys flow from God’s sovereign election of humanity. God is not compelled or bound to save humanity. It is entirely God’s will that led to the election of humanity. Calvin expounds Paul’s words “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4) to emphasise that God was free. The election of humanity is not to do with the merit or efforts of humans, but entirely with God’s sovereign choice. Adam’s sin means that all humanity is cast into sin and enmity with God. Calvin emphasises the difference between foreknowledge and election. We are elected because of God’s free choice, not because God has foreseen future merit. If election were nothing more than the application of the foreknowledge of God it would mean that salvation was determined by human works, rather than by the grace of God. In chapter one, we saw Calvin’s account of human sin as that which estranges humanity from God. Calvin preaches that in Adam humanity is fallen and “we are all born the children of wrath and cursed of God.” Humanity in its essence remains God’s creation, but it is corrupted by the power of sin. So, Calvin states that the enmity is “not in respect of our nature, but in respect of our corruption.” If God did not rescue us, we would perish. Election – God’s free decision – is the source of this salvation. Calvin writes that Paul “declares God’s eternal election is the foundation and first cause of our calling and of all the benefits we receive from God.”

Election’s theological function is to teach that God is the sovereign agent in salvation. In his commentary, Calvin draws on the Aristotelean language of causes to demonstrate the

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61 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 125.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 124–25.
65 Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 40.
66 Ibid., 50.
67 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 124.
relationship between God’s free decision to elect and the church’s salvation. God’s free will is the efficient cause; the material cause is Jesus Christ; the final cause is the praise of God and preaching of the Gospel is the formal cause. Salvation is gifted to the church because God freely chooses to save. The telos or primary goal is to bring God glory, while the immediate goal is that we might be holy. Salvation is achieved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is through the preaching of the Gospel that the church receives the gift of salvation. Humanity does not contribute to salvation. Even the reception of the gift of salvation is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin seeks to emphasise that election is expressive of God’s good pleasure and therefore a cause for the church to praise and glorify God. The doctrine of election draws the church’s eyes upward to the God who is the source and agent of our salvation.

The second objective of the doctrine of election is to provide pastoral assurance of our salvation. Preaching on Ephesians 1:3-4, Calvin critiques the experience of “the papists” who cannot be certain of their salvation as they come to God in prayer. Calvin preaches that Scripture demonstrates that faith in Jesus Christ gives a certainty that we can approach God and call him Father. Since faith is a gift from God, we do not have to maintain it by our efforts; rather it is “maintained from above.” Calvin preaches “that besides setting forth God’s glory, our salvation is also assured by God’s eternal predestination.” This reminds the church to look beyond itself to the God who accomplishes all things for the church.

Election reminds the church of its identity and vocation as the sovereign God’s chosen people who live within God’s creation. The doctrine is not intended to produce speculation about the eternal destiny of individuals, but rather enable the church to respond to the free bestowal of grace in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of election bears observable fruits in the life of the believer. The justification that the believer receives through faith cannot be separated from sanctification. Paul teaches that we were chosen to be “holy and blameless” (Eph 1:4). This is a fruit of election. It also precludes licentiousness or antinomianism that might arise because

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69 Ibid., 126, 128.
70 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 28.
71 Ibid., 28–29.
72 Ibid., 29.
73 Ibid.
74 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 125.
of a confidence in being elect. It is not possible to separate a life of holiness from God’s grace shown in election because holiness is only possible by God’s grace. Ephesians 2:10 states that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” The good works that Paul writes of do not result in our salvation, as we have already seen that God is free in election. Rather, they demonstrate that believers are participating in the Gospel. This participation is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The intention of the doctrine of election in Calvin’s theology is to emphasise the grace of God. The doctrine argues that the relationship between God and the creation unfolds according to God’s sovereign purposes, and no efforts by individuals or human institutions have any bearing on God’s decision. Instead, election teaches that salvation is a fruit of God’s gracious choice. We are saved through Jesus Christ, and we receive this gift through the working of the Holy Spirit. Calvin teaches that the outcomes of the doctrine of election are that the church is led to glorify God and that believers are reassured of their salvation.

Despite the pastoral and theological intent of Calvin’s doctrine of election, modern exegetes have criticised his exegesis of Ephesians 1:4. Preaching on the phrase “chose us” in Ephesians 1:4, Calvin devotes considerable time to explaining that God chooses some for salvation and others “utterly shut out” from it. Calvin defends his position by arguing that God is not subject to human will or understanding and therefore is free to choose whom he wills. We will explore this aspect of Calvin’s doctrine of election further in chapter 3. Calvin emphasises the sovereignty of God repeatedly in his second sermon on Ephesians stating that “God is not bound at all to any person” and that God “owes us not the least thing in the world.” Calvin believes that his double predestinarian (that some are predestined to be saved, and others predestined for damnation) exposition is in accordance with the teachings of Scripture. He suggests that human reaction to the perceived unfairness arises from an unwillingness to submit to the teachings of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. While Ephesians 1 clearly contains a doctrine of election, the question to consider is whether Calvin’s double predestinarian reading is warranted by the text or whether he has engaged in speculation beyond the text.

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75 Ibid., 126.
76 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 23.
77 Ibid., 24.
78 Ibid., 29.
In Markus Barth’s commentary on Ephesians, he contrasts election with determinism and argues that double predestination is an inappropriate reading of Ephesians 1:4. M Barth cites the textual context of Ephesians 1:4. Ephesians 1:4 is part of an adoring account of God’s decision. It is not speculative and the text itself does not suggest anything about those who are not elect. Rather, the text is concerned primarily with God rather than humankind. The passage is concerned with the love of God. We noted that although Calvin’s preference that the phrase “in love” be interpreted as referring to humans, M Barth reads it as referring to God. This means that the passage is describing God’s gracious act, rather than a human response. Furthermore, M Barth argues that Paul is writing about God’s abundant blessing and adoption of us. These are personal and relational terms, rather than legal or determinative terms, which make determinism an inappropriate reading of the text.

M Barth emphasises Paul’s dependence on the Old Testament for describing the relationship between God and the church. M Barth writes that the relationship is described “in terms which lack originality.” He suggests that Paul’s language has a universal tone which does not support a determinist reading. Furthermore, he notes that Ephesians speaks of the mystery of election being made known, rather than needing to remain hidden. M Barth argues that election serves as an assurance for the believer in times of temptation and challenge and that this assurance is the consequence of the awareness of election and forgiveness of sins. He argues that these factors outlined distinguish election from determinism.

The sharpest criticism of Calvin’s double predestinarian reading of Ephesians 1 comes from how we interpret the phrase “in Christ” (Eph 1:3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12). M Barth suggests that “in Christ” can be interpreted in several, interrelated ways. First, Jesus is the one whom God elects. In this, the Son is the Beloved (Eph 1:6) and a passive recipient of the Father’s blessing. Secondly, Christ is the revelation of the mystery of God’s will. God’s purposes are revealed in Christ’s whole life, death, resurrection and ascension. The whole of Jesus’ ministry reveals God’s election. Third, Christ is the instrument of election. Fourth, whilst he is an instrument, Jesus is also an active agent who is free to act in a way to bring glory to the

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80 Ibid., 105.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 106.
84 Ibid., 107.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
Father. This reading shifts the focus of the phrase “in Christ” away from human concerns and to the person and work of Christ.

In his lectures on Ephesians 1, Karl Barth suggests that anthropological concerns motivate Calvin’s teaching of double predestination. K Barth suggests that Calvin has allowed the context in which he lives to lead him to say too much about God, rather than be content with the mysteries of God’s purposes. Calvin could have focused on the love and grace of the God who elects, rather than the fate of different people. We will discuss this further in chapter 3. K Barth acknowledges the intent of the doctrine of election that Calvin teaches is to give glory to God alone. K Barth suggests that had Calvin focused on that he could have avoided double predestination (and two very long sermons defending it). If the criticisms offered by Karl and Markus Barth are correct, they are suggesting that Calvin has been inconsistent. Rather than lifting our gaze to God, Calvin has directed our attention to a pastoral problem in the present context.

In sum, the intent of Calvin’s doctrine of election is to provide assurance to the church. He attempts to offer pastoral encouragement to a community who are seeking to be faithful to God amid a context that is harsh and dangerous. Calvin is trying to give an account of why sin remains present and ongoing depravity in the present context given the sovereignty of God. Calvin assures his listeners that if they believe in Jesus, they are elect and therefore destined for salvation. The doctrine contains the potential to provide assurance. However, the doctrine also invites speculation and uncertainty. It is questionable whether God’s election of the church leads to the logical conclusion that some are predestined to damnation. Given the criticisms of Calvin’s exegesis, it is worth considering how and why Calvin holds the doctrine so firmly? In the following chapter, we will examine the doctrine of election in Calvin’s synthetic work – the Institutes – and question the overall importance of the doctrine in his teachings.

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87 Ibid., 107, 109.
88 Barth, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 94.
Chapter 3 – The Doctrine of Election in the Institutes

As a pastor and teacher of the church, Calvin’s efforts are directed to guiding the church to lift its gaze to God and receive the teachings of Scripture. In his expositions of Ephesians 1, Calvin teaches that the eternal election of God is the fount of this grace. Calvin’s understanding of the doctrine is best summarised by the definition that he offers in the Institutes: “We call predestination God’s eternal decree, by which he compacted with Himself what he willed to become of each man.”¹ The sovereign God determines the fate of each individual. Calvin is clear that according to God’s eternal decree some are elected to eternal life and others to “eternal death” or “damnation.”² Calvin believes that the doctrine of election teaches the sovereignty of God and provides pastoral assurance to the church. We saw that despite criticism of his exegesis, Calvin believes the doctrine is biblically grounded and therefore he is determined to defend it. As Calvin intends for his commentaries to be read alongside the Institutes, his great synthetic work offers a fuller exploration of the doctrine. This chapter will outline and describe Calvin’s doctrine of election as he teaches it in the Institutes. It will be necessary to look at the whole of the Institutes to locate the doctrine of election in the context Calvin intends. Having outlined the doctrine, we will explore Calvin’s exegetical and pastoral foundation of the doctrine and suggest that Calvin’s shaping of the doctrine of election is inconsistent with his teaching that we should lift our gaze to God.

God’s Sovereign Choice

Calvin opens his discussion of the doctrine of election in the Institutes by arguing that “the covenant of life is not preached equally among all men.”³ The reason for this is the eternal election of God. Calvin immediately recognises that whilst his doctrine of election is challenging it also can lead to “sweet fruit” as it enables us to understand God as the wellspring of mercy and illumines God’s grace.⁴ Calvin acknowledges that the doctrine can be perceived as being distasteful or offensive. Calvin’s response to this is that God is sovereign; God is not subject to human judgement, and neither does God owe anything to His creatures. Calvin believes that predestination is a discussion about the “sacred precincts of divine wisdom” and that we must proceed humbly and in reliance on the guidance of the Holy

¹ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.xxi.5.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., III.xxi.1.
⁴ Ibid., III.xi.1.
Spirit who illumines the eyes of the believer.\textsuperscript{5} While predestination speaks of the inapproachable sovereignty of God, it also bears witness to the mystery of God. Throughout his teaching on predestination, Calvin expresses a reluctance to speculate on God’s will beyond what is disclosed in Scripture. However, we will see that at times Calvin appears to ignore his own warning and speculates about the content of God’s will.

Election has been an important way to describe God’s gracious engagement with humanity throughout the Christian tradition. The doctrine has been taught in varying forms by the teachers of the church since the patristic era. It is important to note that the doctrine of election, and the specific form in which Calvin teaches it, did not originate with Calvin but has long been part of the church’s tradition.\textsuperscript{6} Throughout the church’s history the freedom of God, the mystery of God and the righteousness of God have been common to all doctrines of election.\textsuperscript{7} The doctrine is concerned to give account of God’s grace. God moves toward humanity and offers the gift of life. Election affirms that this is not something that can be claimed or earned, but is a gift that is graciously received.\textsuperscript{8} Karl Barth argues that at its best the church understands predestination as receiving the grace that God freely offers.\textsuperscript{9} Barth reminds us that Calvin’s double predestinarian reading of the doctrine of election was in the water, so to speak, and that Calvin’s reception of the doctrine reflects his commitment to drinking from the wells of the church’s teachings.\textsuperscript{10}

Calvin teaches that the past, present and future are always under the eyes of God. He calls this the foreknowledge of God.\textsuperscript{11} Calvin writes that “this foreknowledge extends throughout the universe to every creature.”\textsuperscript{12} Calvin notes that the foreknowledge of God has the potential to re-introduce the notion that works might save humans. If God is all knowing, then predestination could be understood as God identifying those whose future merits will be sufficient for salvation.\textsuperscript{13} Calvin describes this as “covering election with a veil of foreknowledge”, and a “feign that it has its origin elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{14} Calvin instead emphasises

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\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid., III.xxi.2.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 19.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 17.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, III.xxi.5.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., III.xxii.1.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
that the destiny of humans is decided by “God’s eternal decree, by which he compacted with Himself.” Calvin overlooks other contributions that God’s sovereignty over the past, present and future may have. As we will see when we discuss Calvin’s teaching on the resurrection in chapter four, Calvin’s eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God can serve to reshape his doctrine of election.

Calvin discusses God’s election of Israel as a nation. He goes on to describe the election of individuals as “proper election.” We will discuss each aspect in turn. Calvin begins by teaching that God adopts some to the hope of life and sentences others to eternal death. At God’s good pleasure Israel was elected. It was not Israel’s work that led to their election; instead, it was entirely God’s gracious decision. In his discussion of the election of Israel, Calvin highlights that God acts according to God’s will and not human sensibilities. The appropriate response to God’s election of Israel is to be content and to give thanks to God for his grace.

There is a “more limited degree of election” that demonstrates God’s “special grace.” Calvin teaches that election takes place in relation to individuals. Amongst the elect nation of Israel God rejected some individuals and elected others by “cherishing them in the church.” Calvin cites the biblical accounts of God’s election of Isaac and Jacob and rejection of Ishmael and Esau in order to demonstrate that God calls some and rejects others. Calvin writes that this better reveals the “marvellous secret of God.” Calvin’s argues that the biblical witness of Israel where some are elect and some rejected demonstrates that “his free election is only half explained until we come to individual persons to whom God not only offers salvation but so assigns it that the certainty of its effect is not in suspense or doubt.” God is not bound by anything other than his own will, and therefore free to choose or reject people as it pleases him. The election of individuals is based on God’s “freely given mercy, without regard to human worth.” Amongst the elected people of Israel, Calvin believes that many fell away and were not faithful. Though the outward sign of election was present, the inner workings of grace – namely repentance – were not present. The election of individuals combines the

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15 Ibid., III.xxi.5.
16 See chapter 3 & 4 of Randall Zachmann, Reconsidering Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), for a discussion of God’s love and election of Israel before and after Christ.
17 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.xxi.5.
18 Ibid., III.xxi.6.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., III.xxi.7.
outward change with the inner working of the Spirit. God seals this election by “call and justification.”22 The elect are “engrafted to their head, they are never cut off from salvation.”23 Calvin’s doctrine of election can make God appear a tyrant who arbitrarily decides to save some and damn others. Calvin is aware that his doctrine of election is controversial and defends it from what he describes as “unjust” and “false accusations.” Calvin argues that as the sovereign Creator, God is not liable to human judgement. God is sovereign and free and not required to give account to humanity. Calvin writes that “it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God’s will. For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are.”24 God’s will is the highest rule and His righteousness is defined by God rather than by the perceptions of humanity which we know to be fallen. Calvin teaches that the appropriate response to God’s actions is not to seek to know why God has acted thus, but to accept that God has acted “because he has willed it.”25 Despite how it might appear to human beings, Calvin believes that God is just toward the reprobate.26 The appearance of injustice in predestination is not the result of God’s transgressions, but because the sinful human mind cannot comprehend the will of God. The sovereign decree of God determines what is just, rather than human perception. Calvin writes that if we are seeking to understand God’s will beyond this, we are “seeking something greater and higher than God’s will, which cannot be found.”27 In his defences of the doctrine of election Calvin’s recourse is to God’s sovereignty and the mystery of God’s will. He is unapologetic and believes that Scripture clearly points to this.

Calvin explicitly rejects the view that one can believe in election while denying the condemnation of the reprobate. Calvin writes that “those whom God passes over, he condemns, and this he does for no other than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.”28 He writes that the “very inequality of his grace proves that it is free.”29 Calvin cites Romans 9 to illustrate God’s sovereign will and does not make excuses for God; he merely repeats Paul’s assertion that “it is not lawful

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., III.xxiii.2.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., III.xxiii.3.
27 Ibid., III.xxiii.2.
28 Ibid., III.xxiii.1.
29 Ibid., III.xxi.6.
for clay to quarrel with its potter (Rom 9:20)”

We saw this conviction shaping his exegesis of Ephesians 1:4 in the previous chapter.

**Exegetical Basis of the Doctrine of Election**

As a teacher of the church, Calvin seeks to make clear the teachings of Scripture for the church. As we have seen in this and the previous chapter, Calvin devotes considerable time to teaching that God predestines some to eternal life and others to death. Calvin is steadfast that his teachings on the doctrine of election are drawn from Scripture and are therefore profitable for the church. Calvin states that “Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know.”

This is why Calvin spends considerable effort defending his doctrine of election. He asserts that the proper response to Scriptural doctrine that is challenging is not to be silent but to submit to the will of God as He makes it known. Christians are obliged to understand the doctrine of election because God has seen fit to speak of it in Scripture. It is worth exploring whether the *Institutes* offers any clues on how he arrives at his reading of Ephesians 1; and the broader exegetical basis for Calvin’s teachings on this doctrine. This question leads us beyond descriptions of Calvin’s doctrine of election to questioning the way he uses Scripture in the formulation of theological statements. This section will explore Calvin’s use of the Old and New Testament, and the way that he reads certain texts alongside one another to exegete the key texts on which he bases his doctrine of election and explore whether Calvin use of Scripture is consistent with his own teachings on the nature and function of Scripture.

Calvin reads all of Scripture as God’s revelation to the church. As we have seen in chapter one, the words of Scripture are interpreted to the church by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is self-authenticating as God illumines his truths to us in it. On this basis, Calvin juxtaposes different passages of Scripture with one another. This enables a reading that would not emerge if they stood alone. Calvin’s reading of Ephesians 1, specifically Ephesians1:4, is possible because Calvin reads the Ephesians text as part of the whole canon of Scripture and interprets it alongside Romans 9.

30 Ibid., III.xxiii.1.
31 Ibid., III.xxi.3.
32 Ibid., I.vii.5.
While Ephesians 1:4 is addressed to those who have been chosen in Jesus Christ, Calvin’s assertion that logic dictates that others are not chosen does not appear to have an obvious basis in the Ephesians text. We have already examined the criticisms offered by Karl & Marcus Barth in their respective works on Ephesians and thus have seen that modern exegetes question Calvin’s interpretation of Ephesians 1. Calvin intended for his commentaries to be read alongside the Institutes and doing so enables us to see how Calvin arrived at the interpretation he did. This is particularly clear when we explore Calvin’s use of Romans 9 to interpret Ephesians 1.

In Romans 9 Paul teaches about God’s sovereign election of the people of Israel. Paul writes “not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants” (Romans 9:6-7). In the Institutes Calvin writes that “though all had been blessed by hereditary right, the succession did not pass on equally.” Calvin argues that the blessings of God did not arise because of the fleshly inheritance, but because “God’s special election towers and rules over all, alone ratifying his adoption.” The hope of salvation is to be found in God’s special election, and nothing else. Calvin is particularly concerned to defend against the suggestion that God’s Word had failed or was not effective in accomplishing God’s will.

In his commentary on Romans, Calvin writes that “to prevent anyone from thinking it strange that this fulfilment of the promise was not evident in very many of the Jews, Paul, therefore, denies that they were included in the true election of God.” Further, Paul teaches that while some are chosen, some are not chosen and do not belong to Israel. God’s rejection is not because of works, but simply because God decreed it so. Citing Paul “so then he has mercy on whomever he chooses and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses” (Romans 9:18), Calvin argues that the elect and the reprobate are determined solely according to God’s decision.

In Romans 9 Paul wrestles with the reasons why only a small number of Jews accept that God’s covenant promises find their completion in Jesus Christ. He deploys the Old Testament concept of a remnant to give an account of the ongoing faithfulness of God and the apparent unfaithfulness of Israel. Calvin draws on the language of “remnant” in his defence of the

33 Ibid., III.xxii.4.
34 Ibid.
36 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.xxii.11.
doctrine of election. Paul uses this language in Romans 9:27 and again in Romans 11:5. In both situations, the remnant refers to a small portion of the people of Israel who are being saved because God has graciously chosen them. These passages lend support to Calvin’s teachings on the election of individual Israelites (Institutes III.xxi.6) and the election of individuals as the true elect (Institutes III.xi.7). This language in Romans also represents the strongest New Testament support for a double predestinarian understanding of the doctrine of election. It is worth noting that while Romans 9 offers support for Calvin’s doctrine of election, a fuller reading of Romans 11 suggests that the disobedience of Israel will be overcome by the promises of God. Paul writes that “just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy, so they too have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you they too may receive mercy” (Romans 11:30-31) and perhaps more clearly “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26). Calvin chooses to allow his reading of Romans 9 to shape his interpretation of Romans 11 and argues that it further bolsters the predestinarian reading of the doctrine of election.

Perhaps mindful of the harshness of the doctrine, Calvin’s defence of this double predestination is to refer to the mystery of God’s will. Calvin teaches that the appropriate human response to the doctrine of election is to accept the revelation of God’s intentions to us in Scripture. He frequently draws on Paul’s language in Romans 9:19-21, where Paul rhetorically asks whether humans should question the will of God. Following Paul, Calvin discusses the reprobate within the context of the unknowable mystery of God. It is God’s decision to do what he wills with his creation and if he wishes to predestine some to destruction then who is the clay to argue with its potter?\(^\text{37}\)

Having established a New Testament basis for a double predestinarian understanding of the doctrine of election Calvin reads Ephesians 1 through the lens provided by Romans 9. This is consistent with Calvin’s understanding that the Spirit guides the church through the whole canon of Scripture. However, it begs the question of why doesn’t Calvin read Romans 9 through the lens provided by Ephesians 1? If he took this path, Calvin could offer an eschatological reading of Romans 9 which would fit quite comfortably with Paul’s declaration in Romans 11:26 that “all Israel will be saved.” If it is possible to interpret one text through the lens of another, on what basis do we decide which text controls the reading of the other? And since Calvin has clearly decided to do this, it is worth considering what theological

\(^{37}\) Ibid., III.xxiii.1.
factors led him to allow Romans 9 to shape his exegesis of Ephesians 1. In order to explore this question, it is helpful to examine the location of the doctrine of election within the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as a whole.

**Location of the Doctrine of Election in the Institutes**

The arrangement of the *Institutes* helps us to understand the intent of Calvin’s doctrine. Calvin rearranged the *Institutes* with each edition. Calvin sought to arrange the final text to provide an orderly summary of the faith. The final version of the *Institutes* is divided into four books, roughly following the pattern of the Apostles’ Creed. Book I discusses the knowledge of God the Creator, Book II the knowledge of God the Redeemer, Book III how we receive the blessings of God, and Book IV how God constitutes and sustains the church. Calvin was deliberate in arranging the material in the way that he did. He writes that “I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth.”

This means the location of the doctrine of election provides insights into Calvin’s understanding of the doctrine and his intentions. This section will show that by locating the doctrine of election as part of his teachings on justification, Calvin intends to direct the church to receive God’s grace. Calvin is affirming the sovereignty of God and believes that election is a biblical teaching to navigate the present experience.

Calvin teaches that God’s sovereign grace is the starting point for understanding the relationship between humanity and God. God is infinite, majestic and sovereign. He graciously makes Himself known to humanity. In the opening chapter of the *Institutes* Calvin writes that “man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself to God’s majesty.”

Humans are broken and contribute nothing to the relationship. They are in rebellion against God. Calvin writes that “in this ruin of mankind no-one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favourable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us.”

It is the free and sovereign acts of God, in creation and redemption, that makes the relationship between humanity and God possible. Throughout the *Institutes* Calvin meditates on the insight that God is sovereign and explores the significance of God’s sovereignty for how we understand ourselves as God’s creatures and the shape of the life we are called to by God.

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38 Ibid., 3.
39 Ibid., I.i.3.
40 Ibid., I.ii.1.
As a part of his teaching on God the Creator Calvin introduces the providence of God. The providence of God describes God’s sovereignty over creation. Everything humanity has been given is a freely bestowed gift from God. He writes that [God] “not only sustains this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulates it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, and especially rules mankind by his righteousness and judgement, bears with it in his mercy, watches over it by his protection.” This means that looking at the creation itself, a person with eyes enlightened by the Spirit of God sees a reality that is created, sustained and cared for by God. God is “the fountain of good” and is the source of everything we need as humans. Accordingly, Calvin seeks to magnify the grace of God through his teachings on God’s sovereignty.

The final three chapters of Book I of the Institutes are devoted to the doctrine of providence. In the doctrine of providence, Calvin teaches that God is not a “momentary Creator” but that through the Spirit we see God’s ongoing sustenance of the universe. Providence helps us to understand God’s ongoing ordering of the universe. God is the Creator but also “Governor and Preserver” and orders and cares for everything that he has made. God’s sovereign governance of the universe precludes the possibility of chance or fortune. Calvin teaches that despite the human tendency to ascribe things to chance, “anyone who has been taught by Christ’s lips… will look further afield for a cause, and will consider that all things are governed by God’s secret plan.” All of creation is in God’s hands. Calvin teaches that the order of the creation – the sun, rain, plants and trees – are all under the governance of God. Providence teaches that God is the active governor of all events that take place on earth. Calvin’s God is not a deist god, but one who deliberates over everything and decrees what unfolds on earth. Consistent with his teachings on the mystery of the divine will Calvin argues that our minds are too sluggish to understand that all things are ordained by God’s plan. Though calamities may occur, God is actively working out His purpose. Calvin’s doctrine of providence articulates the sovereignty of God in the ordering of the creation.

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., I.xvi.1.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., I.xvi.2.
46 Ibid., I.xvi.3.
47 Ibid., I.xvi.9.
Despite the shared focus on God’s sovereign grace, Calvin’s teaching on providence and election serve different functions in his theology. The doctrine of providence teaches that God governs and maintains everything he has created. Calvin, in contrast to medieval theologians, separates the doctrine of providence from the doctrine of election. As we will see, Calvin locates election as a part of his soteriology which suggests that he sees it as performing a different function from the doctrine of providence in his theology. It is helpful to summarise the doctrine of providence to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the two doctrines.

The effort to separate the doctrines of election and providence suggests that Calvin sees election as more than the doctrine of providence as it applies to salvation. Whilst the doctrines share a common focus on the eternal decrees of God, Calvin’s location of election within the context of justification and the Christian life suggests that in his mind they are separate doctrines that address different concerns. The doctrine of providence addresses God’s sovereignty over creation and provides assurance to the believer that God is ordering the events for the fulfilment of His purposes. The doctrine of election addresses specific pastoral questions in the life of the church – namely, why does it appear that some are saved and others are not? The defence of the sovereignty of God in the justification of sinners is the concern of the doctrine of election.

The doctrine of election addresses the prevenient grace of God in the life of the believer. It is located toward the end of Book III of the *Institutes* which is concerned with the life of the Christian and how the revealed truth of God in Jesus Christ life shapes our lives. This topic will be explored more fully in chapter four, but a summary is helpful to demonstrate the context in which Calvin’s discussion of the doctrine election belongs. Calvin titles Book III “The Way in Which we receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to us from it, and What Effects Follow.” Calvin consistently teaches that the Holy Spirit plays the central role in the Christian life. The Spirit enables the believer to receive and respond to the truth that God reveals through Christ in Scripture. Calvin writes that it is by the Spirit that “we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.” Calvin highlights that the working of the Spirit is distinct from the general power by which God sustains the creation. The life of the believer is different from life in general; Christ came “to separate us from the world and to gather us into

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the hope of the eternal inheritance.” The Holy Spirit is a “spirit of sanctification” because “he is also the root of the heavenly life in us.” The work of the Spirit is to unite the believer to Christ so that we might enjoy the fruits of Christ’s benefits. Our union with Jesus is not a human achievement, but a work of God in the Holy Spirit.

The location of the doctrine of election as a part of Calvin’s teaching on justification highlights the agency of the Spirit. The salvation of believers is brought about by God. While humans are justified by faith alone, it is always important to note that faith is “the principal work of the Spirit.” Through the gift of faith, the Spirit leads the believer to the light of the Gospel so that we might become children of God. Calvin explains that God gives us the Law, and failure to fulfil this Law leads to the sentence of death. Human beings, by Adam’s rebellion, do not have the capacity to fulfil the Law. Therefore, through Christ, the Father helps us so that we might be rescued from the sentence of death. We can be saved only through the Father’s “infinite goodness and mercy.” This gift is received through faith. The teaching on justification follows Trinitarian logic. The Spirit unites the believer to Christ who presents us to the Father. Election serves to underscore God’s sovereignty.

The doctrine of election safeguards the agency of God in the repentance of believers. Calvin teaches that “the sum of the Gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins.” Calvin understands these as gifts that are given to us by Jesus Christ and received in faith. Calvin believes that repentance is only possible through the gift of faith that is given by the Spirit. He writes that “repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith.” Repentance is about breaking away from the former life which is marked by Satan’s tyranny and embracing the Kingdom of God. However, Calvin’s explicit ordering of faith followed by repentance reminds us that God is the sovereign agent in the act of human repentance. The doctrine of election is located after this discussion. It emphasises that who is saved is determined by God’s free choice. Therefore, election accentuates the sovereignty of God in justification.

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50 Ibid., III.i.2.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., III.i.4.
53 Ibid., III.ii.1.
54 Ibid.
55 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.iii.1.
56 Ibid.
The location of the doctrine of election in the *Institutes* suggests that it should not be considered as the central feature of his teachings. Calvin included it as part of his teachings on faith and justification to strengthen and underscore this doctrine. Justification, faith, sanctification are achieved by the work of God. God is sovereign in salvation. The doctrine of election does not seek to articulate Calvin’s whole understanding of God. Instead, it seems to serve to emphasise the sovereignty of God in the justification of humans. It seeks to give expression to Calvin’s understanding that the sovereign purposes of God order reality.

**Scriptural or Contextual Theological Reflection?**

Calvin’s doctrine of election affirms the sovereignty of God in the face of pastoral questions in his present context regarding God’s goodness. In the context of his exploration of the life of faith, Calvin gives assurance to the believer that they belong to God. In the first paragraph of his discussion of predestination, Calvin argues that the doctrine of election persuades us that salvation flows from God’s mercy, that this demonstrates the glory of God and it teaches us true humility. Calvin’s intention is pastoral. He desires that the gifts of God be received by believers and that they have the resources to navigate the present life faithfully.

Calvin develops his doctrine of predestination in an attempt to offer pastoral assurance and hope for the believer in a context where so many people were not following the teachings of the Gospel. Introducing the doctrine of election, Calvin writes that “here is our only ground for firmness and confidence: in order to free us of all fear and render us victorious amid so many dangers, snares, and mortal struggles, he promises that whatever the Father has entrusted into his keeping will be safe.” Calvin seeks to offer assurance and confidence to Christians who are seeking to be faithful in a challenging context. The Scriptural accounts of the call of Abraham, the people of Israel, combined with the New Testament language of election means that the doctrine cannot be overlooked. Faithful adherence to the teachings of Scripture requires the church to develop a doctrine of election. However, it is worth questioning whether Calvin’s formulation of the doctrine is the only path available. Calvin’s chooses to interpret Ephesians 1 through the lens of Romans 9. This is a theological decision that seems to bend the text to say something that it would not say on its own. Barth suggests

57 Ibid., III.xxii.1.
that Calvin arrived before Scripture already committed to a double predestinarian understanding of the doctrine of election.58

It appears that Calvin has not been consistent with his instincts on the nature and function of Scripture in Christian teaching. Calvin arrives before Scripture with a question on his lips. Like his teachers, Augustine and others, we have seen that Calvin seeks to give a Scriptural account of why some people do not respond to the preaching of the Gospel in faith.59 Calvin seeks an answer so that he might provide sound teaching on the doctrine. He develops the doctrine in response to his observations of the present context. Writing of the experience of people not responding to the Gospel, he states “the wonderful depth of God’s judgement is made known.”60 Whilst the non-responsiveness to the Gospel is a genuine question, the present context is not where Calvin teaches us to look for God’s revealed purposes, nor what should shape our reading of Scripture. Barth suggests that Calvin’s pastoral and pedagogical intention reveals a mistake in his exposition of the doctrine of election.61 The question that initiates Calvin’s exploration of the doctrine of election is a human question based on his observation of his context. In his desire to be a good pastor and teacher of the church, it is possible that Calvin has allowed his interpretation of Scripture to be shaped by a contextual question. Instead, Calvin should have allowed his understanding of the contextual situation to be shaped by the teachings of Scripture. While we have seen that Calvin seeks Scriptural support for his doctrine of election, it seems that Scriptures were pressed into the service of a human question rather than being free to speak on their own terms. The issue at stake is the question of perception! Calvin asserts that human perception is fallen and limited and therefore unable to perceive the truths of God. And yet in his doctrine of election, Calvin forgets to lift his gaze and adopts an approach that begins with this darkened context rather than the revealed reality of Christ received by the church in the Holy Spirit.

Election helps the church understand the relationship between God and the creation. Calvin develops his doctrine of election in order to emphasise and defend the sovereignty of God and the infallibility of the divine decree. Pastorally, the doctrine reminds the believer that there is a reality that is ordered according to the sovereign purposes of God that lie beyond human perception. Calvin’s pastoral intention is laudable; however the doctrine of election has a dark

58 Barth, Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 2, Vol 2, 41.
59 Ibid., 39.
60 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.xxi.1.
underbelly. Despite Calvin’s protests, the decree that some are destined for salvation and others for damnation does cast God as a tyrant who issues inhumane decrees. The centrality of mystery of God’s will in the doctrine of election is critical to any account of the doctrine; perhaps the question to be explored is to what extent can we discern the will of God? Moreover, if it is possible to discern God’s will, how would we go about doing that?

Calvin, despite his best intentions and warnings, risks seeking to penetrate too far into the mysteries of God. His doctrine of election suggests a knowledge of God’s will that skates over the ambiguity that Scripture presents. Scripture is unequivocal in declaring that God elects. It is also unequivocal in declaring that this has implications for all people. However, Scripture is ambiguous on whether there is a pre-determined post-mortem fate for all people. Calvin’s double predestinarian reading of the doctrine of election requires theological decisions and logical leaps. It seems that the pastoral and contextual questions posed by the lack of responsiveness to God’s Word have tempted Calvin to speculate about the mystery of God and His will. This results in a focus on the absolute decree of God, which is abstracted from the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We have seen that the Scriptural basis of Calvin’s doctrine of election is enabled by the joining together of specific New Testament texts. In a similar fashion, Barth offers a radical revision of the Reformed doctrine of election. Barth argues that the starting point for a proper understanding of the doctrine of election needs to be the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed to by the Holy Spirit in Scripture. At first glance, it would seem that this is entirely consistent with Calvin’s Trinitarian logic and his understanding of the role and function of Scripture. Barth also takes Ephesians 1 as a key text for exploring the doctrine of election, and like Calvin, he uses other texts to guide his reading. Mary Kathleen Cunningham helpfully demonstrates Barth’s creative use of the prologue of John’s Gospel. Barth rejects the notion of a divine decree that is abstracted from the person of Jesus Christ. To arrive at this, Barth shifts the focus of his exegesis of Ephesians 1:4 from the divine decree to the Word that was God in the beginning (John 1:1). The result is that Barth can describe Jesus Christ as the electing God and the one who is elect.

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62 Ibid., 43.
63 Ibid., 53.
Barth’s radical revision of the doctrine, enabled by the joining together of various texts, casts light on the most significant criticism of Calvin’s doctrine of election – namely the role of Christ. Where Barth seeks to define his doctrine of election with reference to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Calvin’s doctrine of election seems to be characterised by the sovereign, yet hidden, eternal decree of God. It seems that Christ’s work is subservient to the divine will. This suggests an instrumental understanding of the person and work of Christ and limits the agency of Christ in God’s purposes. Calvin’s pastoral intent has left him open to the suggestion that he has abandoned the Christological roots of Christian theology.

While the doctrine of election represents an inconsistency within Calvin’s teaching, it seems that Calvin’s theology provides us with the tools to rehabilitate the doctrine. We have argued that Calvin’s doctrine of election developed in response to human questions that were presented by the context in which he lived and worked, rather than by meditating on the revelation of God’s reality as it is witnessed by the Spirit in Scripture. Calvin emphasises the absolute decree of God to answer the pastoral question. However, his teachings on hope and faith provide an alternative route to bear witness to God’s sovereignty, whilst being faithful to the freedom of God, the mystery of God and the righteousness of God that he seeks to rightly defend in his doctrine of election.

Faith and hope lift the eyes of the church to the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. This offers Christologically grounded assurance. We have already seen in Calvin’s exegesis of Ephesians 1 that hope is significant in his understanding of the Gospel. Within the *Institutes*, Calvin’s teaches explicitly on the resurrection relatively briefly following his discussion of the doctrine of election. We will see in chapter 4 that hope enables the believer to look beyond the immediate context to God’s truth. The world in which we live continues to be marked by the presence of sin and destruction, and it is only through the workings of the Spirit that we can perceive God’s sovereign purposes. Calvin writes that “the apostle does not consider the eyes of our mind well illumined, except as we discern what hope of the eternal inheritance is to which we have been called. And everywhere he so teaches as to intimate that we cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather it from the fruit of great assurance.” Faith in the teachings of Calvin enables the Christian to live in the hope that what is before our eyes is not all that there is. The Christian life is lived by faith, in hope for the future that God has prepared in Jesus and made available through the Holy Spirit.

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66 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.ii.16.
Again, Calvin writes “faith, therefore, having grasped the love of God, has the promises of the present life and of that to come, and firm assurance of all good things, but of such sort as can be perceived from the Word.” Calvin writes that “then, therefore, with our eyes fast fixed on Christ we wait upon heaven, and nothing on earth hinders them from bearing us to the promised blessedness, the statement is truly fulfilled ‘that where our treasure is, our heart is’ (Matt. 6:21)”.

The source and content of the hope that Christians enjoy is Jesus Christ who brings us the “light of life.” Calvin teaches that union with God is what we are looking forward to and will receive when Christ returns. The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of this account, and “in his person the Holy Spirit repeatedly sets before us the example of resurrection.” As we proceed, we will see that Calvin’s eschatological insights shape his understanding of the Christian life and provide the church with assurance as it navigates the present context.

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67 Ibid., III.ii.28.
68 Ibid., III.xxv.1.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., III.xxv.3.
Chapter 4 – Faith, Hope and the Christian Life

We have seen that Calvin’s pastoral instincts lead him to employ the doctrine of election to address the discord that believers experience between God’s sovereign purposes and the fallen context in which life unfolds. While the tension is undeniable, the utility of the doctrine of election for solving it is questionable. However, Calvin’s teaching offers alternative resources for believers to address and navigate faithfully the present context.

The unfolding of God’s sovereign purposes in the life of the believer shape Calvin’s teaching on the Christian life. Calvin’s pedagogical and pastoral intentions coincide as he calls believers to lift their eyes to Christ. Calvin aims to “show the godly man how he may be directed to a rightly ordered life,” and seeks to “briefly set down some universal rule” that will guide Christians to live according to God’s will. 1 His teachings on the Christian life address the internal and external life of the believer. Calvin presents a holistic spirituality which leads the believer to glorify God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Calvin is a pastor, as much as a teacher, and seeks to equip the church to be faithful to God’s call in a context that masks and obfuscates God’s truth. Calvin lifts his gaze and taking his cues from the reality that is revealed in Jesus Christ, he does not retreat from the fallen context in which the Christian life is lived. Instead, the church is called to engage with the present context. The shape of this engagement is determined by the character of the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

We will see that a Christologically grounded eschatology characterises Calvin’s teachings on the Christian life. An eschatological appeal to hope offers an alternative route for addressing the discord between God’s promises and the lived experience of believers. This chapter will begin by exploring Calvin’s teachings on the Christian life presented in Book III of the Institutes. We will turn to Calvin’s eschatology and discuss the significance of the resurrection for how we understand the sovereignty of God. This will demonstrate that an eschatological understanding of God’s sovereignty can underpin a spirituality that enables the individual and the church to navigate the tension between the context and God’s reality.

Faith, Repentance and the Holy Spirit.

The life of the Christian is lived in union with Jesus Christ. The union is formed by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our union with Christ transforms every aspect of our being and results in the old self being put to death and a new life beginning in Christ. Christ’s redemptive work

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1 Ibid., III.vi.1.
regenerates both the inner and outer life of the believer. Regeneration is an eschatological process that is completed upon Christ’s return. Calvin’s teachings on the Christian life include a range of exhortations to obedience which can suggest that Calvin’s spirituality is harsh and austere. However, when understood in the context of the gracious union with Christ, Calvin offers a contemplative and lively spirituality that fosters receptivity to the Triune God’s blessings in the life of the believer. Believers are led to express the image of God in their lives and bring glory to God.\(^2\) Calvin’s discussion on faith is a prelude to Calvin’s teaching on justification and sanctification, which we will explore in turn. This section will explore Calvin’s teaching on faith and repentance which stands at the beginning of his writing in Book III. We will discuss the Christological focus of faith, the agency of the Holy Spirit and the love of God which characterise Calvin’s teachings on faith. The eschatological character of faith will be noted throughout this chapter and discussed more thoroughly in the final section.

The object of Christian faith is Jesus Christ. Calvin defines faith as “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”\(^3\) Faith teaches humanity to lift its gaze to Jesus by the Spirit. It follows a Trinitarian logic, as the Spirit unites us to Christ’s work. We obtain salvation “when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ, and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life.”\(^4\)

The Gospel is preached to humans and received in faith. Sin places humanity under the sentence of death, and it is only by the intercession of Christ that we can be rescued.\(^5\) Calvin writes that “God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ’s splendour had not beamed on us.”\(^6\) In Christ, the sovereign God reveals his will toward humanity, and the proper response is obedience. Calvin writes that “Paul defines faith as that obedience which is given to the Gospel.”\(^7\) While faith teaches us to look to Christ; the human mind is inclined to seek truth elsewhere. Human perception is dulled by the effects of sin and puffed up with pride and

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\(^2\) See Randall Zachmann, *Reconsidering Calvin* for a discussion of Calvin’s appreciation of the image of God.

\(^3\) Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.ii.7.

\(^4\) Ibid., III.ii.2.

\(^5\) Ibid., III.ii.1.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid., III.ii.6.
“blind self-love.” Faith enables humans to see what is otherwise hidden from our senses. The Spirit causes us to seek truth in God alone. Calvin writes, “We must be drawn by the Spirit to be aroused to seek Christ.” Faith rests on the work of the Spirit who interprets Scripture to us and imparts the knowledge of God.

Calvin teaches that there is an indelible connection between faith and the Word. The Gospel is received by humanity as a gift, rather than something that we can naturally access. Calvin describes a “permanent relationship between faith and the Word.” Faith arises from the teachings of the Gospel, which is the basis by which faith is supported and sustained. If the Word is taken away, then faith falls. Calvin describes the Word as being “like a mirror in which faith may contemplate God.” The Word reveals that God exists and reveals God’s will toward us.

Faith leads the believer to the assurance of God’s kindness and love toward them. The knowledge of faith leads to a recognition of God’s grandeur and human fallenness. The Spirit imparts true knowledge of God and true knowledge of ourselves. This two-fold knowledge frees humanity from the pride and self-love that characterise humanity’s delusional self-understandings. The knowledge of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit – received in faith. The Holy Spirit unites us to the saving work of Jesus Christ and from this union flow the fruits of faith, repentance and holiness of life. Through the work of the Spirit, we are united to Christ, which means that we should no longer think of ourselves outside of Jesus. This means that the believer is assured that through God’s good gift in Jesus Christ they may stand before the throne of God with confidence. Calvin teaches that confidence or “peace [Rom 5:1]” is the effect of faith in the believer and is consistent with the New Testament witness such as Hebrews 3:7, Romans 8:38-39, and Ephesians 1:18.

The understanding of faith in the Institutes is consistent with Calvin’s exegesis of Ephesians 1 in his commentary. Calvin describes this assurance and confidence that faith brings as a work of the Holy Spirit. In his commentary on Ephesians 1:13-14, Calvin writes that “the true conviction which believers have of the Word of God, of their own salvation, and of all religion, does not spring from the feelings of the flesh or from human and philosophical
arguments, but from the sealing of the Spirit, who makes their conscience more certain and removes all doubt.”\(^{14}\) Calvin highlights that if faith were based on human feelings or thought it “would be frail and unsteady.” It is rather the work of the Spirit that makes the proclamation of the Gospel effective.\(^{15}\) The Spirit’s gift of faith has a two-fold effect on the believer. The Spirit “enlightens the intellect” and it “confirms the thinking.”\(^{16}\) Faith, from beginning to end, is a work of the Holy Spirit, which serves to give knowledge and assurance to the believer.

Calvin’s teaching on faith reminds us that only God’s grace can save humans. This understanding of faith affirms the sovereignty of God and demonstrates that the life of the believer proceeds at God’s initiative. The notion that human beings possess the capacity to engage with God on their own terms is rejected. Calvin shows that the sovereignty of God is not just a doctrinal debate but has significant pastoral implications. In his discussion on the relation between faith and fear, Calvin demonstrates how faith enables us to see past the struggles of the immediate context to a reality that is ordered according to God’s sovereign purpose. As life unfolds during a context where sin continues to be present, faith assures the believer that God is sovereign and at work for the good of the believer. Calvin writes that “faith is so far above sense that man’s mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it.”\(^{17}\) Faith enables the gaze of the believer to pierce the obfuscating effects of sin to perceive the reality of God’s sovereign purposes. The vision enabled by the gift of faith gives rise to hope which is founded on God’s mercy.

The certainty of faith in the face of the challenges of our context rests upon an understanding of faith as being a work of God. It is not a human achievement, and therefore human shortcomings cannot cause it to be lost. Calvin recognises that believers struggle with doubt. He writes that “we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.”\(^{18}\) Calvin uses the Scriptural example of David who consistently records “how unquiet his mind always was.”\(^{19}\) Despite the doubts and shortcomings, David continued to seek and return to God. The certainty of faith is about a life that has been reoriented toward God, rather than intellectual certainty. Calvin describes this

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\(^{14}\) Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 131.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 132.


\(^{18}\) Ibid., III.ii.17.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
tension with the division between flesh and spirit. Calvin writes “the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness, partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity; partly rests upon the promise of the Gospel, partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity; partly rejoices at the expectation of life, partly shudders at death.” He demonstrates pastoral sensitivity and recognition of the ongoing presence of sin in the life of the believer. Calvin’s understanding of faith as a gift from the Holy Spirit allows him to confidently assert that faith will “ultimately triumph over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it.”

Calvin’s account of faith provides a basis on which the Christian life can be lived. While justification by faith lies at the heart of Calvin’s theology, this needs to be understood in a holistic sense. The knowledge of God is not intellectual knowledge; instead, it confronts the believer with reality and calls them to a new form of life. Karl Barth writes that Calvin saw that the knowledge of God did not eliminate the problem of ethics “but truly poses [it] for the first time.” Throughout his account of faith Calvin is attentive to the ethical question – namely what shape should Christian life take in the light of the knowledge that God has revealed in the Word. In sections III.i.15-43 of the Institutes, Calvin offers pastoral guidance to the believer on the nature of faith and the shape of the life that it calls them to. Faith is a gift of the Spirit and reshapes the life of the believer.

Repentance

The gift of faith leads the believer to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Calvin writes that “the sum of the Gospel is held to consist in repentance and the forgiveness of sins.” He defines repentance as “the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.” This definition highlights the role that a holistic understanding of the knowledge of God plays in repentance. It teaches that faith is the pivot on which

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20 Ibid., III.i.18.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 In the essay “Inconvenient, because Consistent, Theology: John Calvin and Karl Barth” in Calvin Today: Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church, eds Welker, Michael; Weinrich, Michael & Moller, Ulrich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011) Michael Weinrich argues that both Calvin and Barth’s consistent engagement with the issues of their day was a result of their theological responsibility.
24 Barth, The Theology of John Calvin, 82.
26 Ibid., III.iii.5.
believers turn toward God. This section will summarise Calvin’s teaching on repentance and enable a fuller discussion on his teachings about the shape of the Christian life.

Forgiveness of sins and repentance are gifts from God that are received in faith. Repentance is both rooted in and enabled by faith. It is only as the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves is imparted by the Holy Spirit that we become aware of a need for repentance. Calvin writes that “no-one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognised God’s grace.”\textsuperscript{27} In the first-place repentance is a “turning of life to God.”\textsuperscript{28} This involves both an internal and external change. The internal changes brought about by the workings of the Spirit is what “bring(s) forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal.”\textsuperscript{29} The believer who receives justification through the gift of faith is not free to live as they please, rather they are required to live according to the will of God that is made known in the Law. In his sermons in Ephesians 1:4 Calvin preaches that “it is not lawful for us to indulge in loose living with the excuse that God elected us” because “we must not put asunder which he has coupled together.”\textsuperscript{30} We will see in our discussion of Calvin’s teachings on the shape of the Christian life that these internal and external fruits are defined by the teaching of the moral Law.

Repentance is brought about by “an earnest fear of God.”\textsuperscript{31} Belief in God’s impending judgement rouses the believer to turn away from a life of sin to a life of righteousness. Calvin develops the role of God as a judge, drawing on a range of Scriptural texts that portray the wrath of God going forth against sinners.\textsuperscript{32} Calvin argues that the image of God as a judge is in Scripture to warn and encourage humans to repent so they might avoid this judgement. While Calvin’s writing can invoke the sense of God as an unpleasant and impersonal judge, Calvin portrays God in this fashion to highlight two aspects of justification. First that the sin in which humanity is trapped is utterly deplorable to God. Secondly, God in grace has given a warning of the judgement to come and opened a path to justification through faith. Calvin suggests that such threats of God’s judgement are necessary because the “slothfulness of the flesh could not be corrected” otherwise.\textsuperscript{33} It is worth noting here that in his effort to

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., III.iii.2.\textsuperscript{32} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, III.iii.7.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., III.iii.6.\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.\textsuperscript{32} Calvin, \textit{Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians}, 35.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
emphasise human depravity, Calvin risks undermining the sovereignty of God. He writes that “the depravity of our nature compels God to use severity in threatening us.” The suggestion that something outside of God compels him is inconsistent with Calvin’s teaching on the sovereignty of God. The image of God as a judge needs to be read in the context of Calvin’s teachings on the nature of faith. Whilst God is a judge, in faith the believer knows God as our Heavenly Father who has made gracious provision for their salvation in Jesus Christ.

Calvin describes repentance as the “mortification of the flesh” and the “vivification of the Spirit.” Mortification and vivification of the believer occur when we are united to Jesus Christ. The believer is crucified with Jesus. This means that the “corruption of the original nature may no longer thrive.” The believer is united to Christ’s resurrection which means being raised up to the newness of life. Mortification of the flesh involves leaving aside evil things. This is only possible when we “deny our own nature.” The Spirit then “imbues our souls, steeped in his holiness, with new thoughts and feelings” which leads us to lives marked by righteousness and holiness. Calvin uses the word mortification to describe the turning away from the old life. Calvin’s pastoral instinct shows when he acknowledges how difficult this is for us. He writes that “from mortification we infer that we are not conformed to the fear of God and do not learn the rudiments of piety unless we are violently slain by the word of the Spirit and brought to nought.” Mortification and vivification show that repentance involves a turning away from the life of sin to a life lived in accordance with God’s Law. Calvin summarises repentance as “regeneration whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God.”

Regeneration is not a one-off event but is an ongoing process in which God is at work in renewing hearts and minds through repentance. Regeneration is understood within an eschatological framing of the Christian life. Calvin writes that “through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to Himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they practise repentance throughout their lives and know this warfare will only

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34 Ibid. Emphasis added.
35 Ibid., III.iii.8.
36 Ibid., III.iii.9.
37 Ibid., III.iii.8.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., III.iii.9.
end in death.” This acknowledges that people remain affected by sin throughout their lives. God’s work in Christ does not remove the believer from the context in which they live; instead, it lets them see and experience the reality of God’s transformative power working by the Holy Spirit.

Calvin’s teachings on repentance bear witness to the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit whilst simultaneously taking the nature of sin seriously. Through the Spirit’s gift of faith and the repentance that follows, sin loses its dominion over the believer. However, despite sin being defeated in Christ, it remains present. Sin is more than the aggregate of misdemeanours, Calvin teaches that “we label sin that very depravity which begets within us desires of this sort.” While believers are freed from the guilt of sin, it remains in our mortal bodies. The Spirit gives the believer the power to strive and overcome sin. This means that Christians are not immune from the effects of sin and will continue to be sinful. Calvin criticises the Anabaptist teaching that humans are restored to innocence and freed from sin and therefore need not worry about sinning. Calvin labels this teaching as “monstrous” and argues that this merely provides excuses for all sorts of excesses. Calvin urges our understanding of the work of Christ and the Spirit to be shaped by the actual ministry of the Spirit. He writes that the Spirit “has been given to us for sanctification in order that he may bring us, purged of uncleanliness and defilement, into obedience to God’s righteousness.” Repentance does not make believers perfect; rather it is an ongoing reorientation of life that is the Spirit’s work of sanctification. The Christian life looks beyond the present experience of sin to the eschatological fulfilment of God’s promises.

The Law

Calvin teaches that repentance will result in concrete changes in the life of the believer. While Calvin is attentive to the internal dynamics of repentance, the moral dimensions of God’s work in Christ are central to how he understands the Christian life. Calvin writes that “the more earnestly any man measures his life by the standard of God’s Law, the surer are the signs of repentance that he shows.” Calvin believes that what is required for a man to live a faithful life has been set forth in Scripture, particularly the Old Testament Law. We will now turn to Calvin’s teachings on the Law to understand the shape of his ethical teachings.

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., III.iii.14.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., III.iii.16.
Calvin teaches that the Law was given to the Jewish people in order to “set forth a godly and righteous rule of living” and to “hold their minds in readiness” for the Messiah’s arrival. This Law was not given to be oppressive, but to remind Israel that they were heirs to the gracious promise that God had established with Abraham. Calvin teaches that the Law has three key functions: firstly, to show God’s righteousness and simultaneously reveal human brokenness; secondly to restrain ungodly behaviour through the threat of divine punishment, and finally, and most properly, to help believers learn God’s will to which they aspire. In our discussion of the Law, we will discuss each function and see that Calvin’s understanding of the Law begins with the grace of sovereign God.

The Law is a part of God’s gracious revelation to humanity. Through the words of the Law, the Spirit enables us to see the truth of God’s righteousness and human sinfulness. The Law serves to illuminate the truth of its predicament to humanity. Without God’s revelation in the Law, it is not possible for humanity to see this. Calvin writes that “man, schooled in the Law, sloughs off the arrogance that previously blinded him.” We can see that this understanding of the function of the Law is consistent with Calvin’s teaching on the nature and function of Scripture. It also shows the connection between knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. The revelation of God’s will in the Law provides a basis against which human life can be compared and reveals to humanity their need for a saviour.

Calvin teaches that the Law contains within it a promise. It is based on the covenant that God freely established with Abraham and anticipated our adoption in Christ. He writes that the Law “is the true and only preparation for seeking Christ.” Calvin distinguishes between the ceremonial Law, concerned with the rituals and ceremonies, and the moral Law. Calvin writes that God gave the ceremonial Law and commanded sacrifices in order that “he might lift their minds higher.” Commenting on Ephesians 2:15 Calvin teaches that the ceremonial Law has been abolished in Christ because it has served its purpose. The ceremonial was given that Israel would look to God and remember that “their lot was different from that of the rest.” In Christ, this purpose of God has been fulfilled. Whilst the ceremonial aspects of the Law have been abolished, Calvin teaches that the moral Law remains in force and “includes teachings
that concern us no less than the Jews.”

The Law directs us to the eternal purposes of God, but fulfilling the Law is not something that is attainable for humanity. Sin, which the Law also reveals, makes it impossible for humanity to live according to the Law. Calvin teaches that although humanity lacks the ability to fulfil the Law, it was not given in vain. “For we have learned that they [the commandments of the law] will be fruitless and ineffectual for us unless God, out of his free goodness, shall receive us without looking at our works, and when we in faith embrace that same goodness held forth to us by the Gospel.” Thus the Law has an eschatological character that is fulfilled in Christ. The Law anticipates the completion of God’s purposes, and so bears witness to a reality beyond what is observable in the immediate context. This eschatological element offers pastoral assurance to the believer seeking to be faithful to God’s will.

The second function of the Law is to provide the basis for a peaceful society. Calvin writes that the Law functions “by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by dire threats.” This second function of the Law is not directed at the believer but the rest of society. The Law serves as a part of God’s sovereign ordering of creation. Wicked people are compliant with the Law because of the “dire threats” in the Law. Threat-driven compliance does not make them righteous before God, because the inner depravity has not been changed by God’s work. The Law is a way in which God enables a community to function. Calvin writes that “this constrained and forced righteousness is necessary for the public community of men, for whose tranquillity the Lord herein provided when he took care that everything be not tumultuously confounded.” The second function of the Law is an application of the doctrine of providence discussed in chapter three. It is a part of how God governs all of creation.

The third and “principal” function of Law is to lead believers to understand and follow God’s will. Calvin teaches that the Law reveals the character of God and God’s intention for humanity. The Law benefits the godly in two ways. Firstly, it enables the believer to learn the divine will. Secondly, believers benefit from the regular study of the Law which results in the believer being “aroused to obedience, be[ing] strengthened, and be[ing] drawn back from the

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50 Ibid.
52 Ibid., II.vii.10.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
slippery path of transgression.”\textsuperscript{55} Calvin writes that if any person carries out the Law, “he will express the image of God, as it were, in his own life.”\textsuperscript{56} However, as we explore Calvin’s teachings on the Law, we will see that this principal use of the Law needs to be understood within the context of the Spirit’s work in bringing the believer into union with Christ.

Calvin explains the “moral law” or Ten Commandments to offer an account of the shape of the life that God intends for humanity. He teaches that the inward Law which God engraves on our hearts has the same content as the Ten Commandments. Because of our dullness and our arrogance, “the Lord has provided us with a written Law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law.”\textsuperscript{57} The Law makes demands of our whole lives. The Christian life is not simply about outward appearance. God’s Law “speaks no less to the soul than to the body.”\textsuperscript{58} It is a Law that is concerned with heart, mind, body and soul.

Calvin believes that the words of the Law require interpretation.\textsuperscript{59} As the believer meditates upon the Law, we are to be guided by Jesus. Calvin describes Jesus as the Law’s “best interpreter” who offers a correct understanding of God’s intention in the Law.\textsuperscript{60} Calvin teaches that to understand the Law we should ask why each commandment was given. He suggests that when God forbids something, it is because he enjoys the opposite. Likewise, when God commands something, it is because the opposite displeases him.\textsuperscript{61}

Calvin’s teachings on the Christian life are shaped by his convictions on the connectedness of the Old and New Testaments. He teaches that the Christian is called to live in accordance with the revealed will of God. The Law is a written expression of the will of God, and by the work of the Spirit, the believer is led to obedience to this Law. This is consistent with his understanding of the nature and function of Scripture. Calvin writes that “through Christ the teaching of the Law remains inviolable; by teaching, admonishing, reproving and correcting it forms us and prepares us for every good work.”\textsuperscript{62} The connectedness between the Old and New Testament is found in Christ. Calvin regards the Law as a witness to, and preparation

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\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., II.vii.12.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., II.viii.51.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., II.viii.1.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., II.viii.6.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., II.viii.8.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., II.viii.7.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., II.viii.8.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., II.vii.14.  
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for, the coming of Jesus Christ. What is taught in the Old Testament is a part of the same covenant that Jesus fulfils.

The Christian life is motivated by the love that God has shown in Jesus Christ. It is a “love of righteousness” that is borne of the Spirit’s work in our hearts that leads to a desire to follow God’s Law. While fulfilling the Law leads us to express the image of God in our lives we need to understand this Law through Christ whom Scripture teaches is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Calvin writes that Christ is the one “through whom we return to favour with God” and is also “an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life.” The pattern Calvin offers for the Christian life is shaped by the person and work of Jesus Christ. This means that it is the content of the Gospel proclamation that determines the shape of the Christian life. Jesus Christ, rather than the written words themselves, is the motivation and shape of the Christian life.

Self-Denial and the Cross

Calvin’s teachings on Christian life are shaped by the work of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Believers are called to a life directed by and toward the God who is met in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. This stands in stark contrast to how humanity seeks to live. Our sinful nature leads us to believe that we belong to ourselves and can direct our own lives. This is self-love and pride. Calvin teaches that the key to Christian life is self-denial. He writes that “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds.” Following our own fallen reason and self-interest leads to destruction. We belong to God, and God’s will and bidding should shape our lives. Calvin writes that “Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him.” The call to self-denial is Christologically grounded and urges the believer to look to the eschatological promise of resurrection.

Calvin’s call to self-denial is how we die to ourselves and allow the life of Christ that has been freely given by God to flourish within us. Through self-denial, the believer is united to

63 Ibid., III.vi.2.
65 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.vi.3.
66 Ibid., III.vii.1.
67 Ibid.
68 Zachman, “‘Deny Yourself and Take up Your Cross’: John Calvin on the Christian Life,” 471.
the death of Christ, which means that the corrupting influence of sin is put to death. Likewise, the believer is united to the resurrection of Jesus and liberated that they might live according to the pattern that God sets forth in Jesus Christ and witnesses by the Spirit in Scripture. Calvin writes that “we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter, think, speak, meditate, and nothing except to his glory.”

Calvin writes with an awareness of the eschatological tension between the resurrection and parousia of Jesus Christ. He does not imply that believers should be capable of perfectly conforming to the will of Christ. Instead, he states that “I do not insist that the moral life of a Christian man breathe nothing but the Gospel, yet this ought to be desired, and we must strive toward it.” Humanity is living in a context where God’s work is yet to be completed. However, Christ’s work has revealed the destination and goal to which we aspire. Self-denial means to put aside our inclinations that are borne from our sinful nature and instead seek God. “It is as if it were said that the beginning of right living is spiritual, where the inner feeling of the mind is unfeignedly dedicated to God for the cultivation of holiness and righteousness.” This life that is lived in union with Christ fundamentally alters how we engage with the present context in which we live. Self-denial shapes all the relationships in life.

Paul writes that the Philippians should have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and consider all other people as greater than themselves (Phil 2:3-5). This ethical teaching is contrary to the pride and self-love that characterises sinful human thinking. Calvin writes that “it gives us commandments of which our mind is quite incapable unless our minds be previously emptied of its natural feeling.” Paul’s instructions require a different way of seeing fellow humans and ourselves. This is achieved through self-denial and union with Christ. Calvin offers several Scriptural reasons why this self-denial is in accordance with Scripture. Firstly, Scripture teaches that all good things come from God and that we possess nothing that we have not received from God. God intends that the gifts we have been given are used for “the common good of the church.” The gifts that might lead us to think of ourselves better than others are given so that they may be used for the benefit of others.

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70 Ibid., III.vi.5.
71 Ibid.
72 Zachman, “‘Deny Yourself and Take up Your Cross’: John Calvin on the Christian Life,” 472.
74 Ibid.
Furthermore, Calvin teaches that Scripture commands us to love and draws on 1 Corinthians 13 which serves as a guide for generosity to one another.

The Christian is taught to look to God. Lifting our gaze to God transforms our perception of our context and the present life. The ability to love our neighbour flows from God. Calvin teaches that rather than looking at other people and seeing the human things we perceive the image of God.\(^\text{75}\) To perceive the image of God we need to put aside fallen human perception and embrace the teachings of Scripture in faith. Our union with Christ by the Holy Spirit transforms our relationship with fellow humanity because we no longer engage one another on the basis of our context. Instead through self-denial we engage with fellow humanity through the revealed Christ.

The cross is the central image for understanding Calvin’s teaching on self-denial. In Matthew 16 Jesus teaches that his followers must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow (Matt 16:24). In Calvin’s teaching, the cross helps to transform the believer to the likeness of Christ. It also serves to remind the believer to look to Jesus Christ. This is both pedagogical and pastoral, as it instructs the believer in the Christian life and offers hope. Accordingly, Calvin warns that union with Christ is challenging and difficult. “For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil.”\(^\text{76}\) The cross leads the believer to deeper patience and obedience. The more obedient to God’s will one is, the more sufferings they are likely to endure. This is a result of rejecting what is sinful in the context and living in accordance with God’s revealed reality.

Justification

At the heart of the teaching of Reformation is the doctrine of justification. It would be remiss to discuss Calvin’s understanding of the Christian life and not explore his teachings on the nature of justification. Calvin teaches that our discussion of justification belongs within the context of the redemptive work of Christ who was given to us by the Father to be received in faith.\(^\text{77}\) Through participating in Christ, we receive a “double grace” where we are reconciled

\(^{75}\) Ibid., III.vii.6.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., III.viii.1.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., III.xi.1.
to God and are sanctified by the Spirit so as to cultivate the Christian life. Calvin discusses the nature of justification in order to assure believers of the foundation of their faith. Calvin writes that “unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgement concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.” Justification is the “hinge” on which the Christian faith turns, and so deserves a full discussion in our exploration of Calvin’s teachings on the Christian life.

Calvin teaches that to be justified is to be reckoned righteous before God. Calvin contrasts justification by works with justification by faith. To be justified by works a life would need to be holy and righteous before God. In contrast, to be justified by faith is to “grasp at the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appear in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.” Calvin defines justification as “the acceptance with which God received us into his favour as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”

At the heart of Calvin’s teachings on justification is the believer’s union with Christ. The “mystical union” means that believers are made sharers in the gifts of Christ. This means that believers can share in the righteousness of Christ as participants in his body. It is not a distant, transactional imputation of righteousness, but the result of the believer's participation in the person of Christ.

Believers are justified by faith. Calvin comments on Philippians 3:8-9 that “a man who wishes to obtain Christ’s righteousness must abandon his own righteousness.” We cannot obtain righteousness by our efforts but only by the grace of God. Calvin teaches that justification by faith involves turning from our works to contemplate the mercy of God and the perfection of Jesus Christ. The starting point of justification is that “God deigns to embrace the sinner with his pure and freely given goodness” and that God “seeks in Himself

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., III.xi.2.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., III.xi.10.
84 Ibid., III.xi.13.
85 Ibid., III.xi.16.
the reason to benefit man.”86 Justification is a gift given by the sovereign God who chooses in mercy to reconcile ungodly men to Himself. God is the agent of justification, and the gift is received in faith, which is a gift of the Spirit.

In sum, justification is a way of talking about the salvific work of the Triune God by which believers are brought into union with Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit so that they can give glory to God the Father. Calvin clearly teaches that justification is a work of God, and therefore needs to be understood on God’s terms.87 We cannot liken it to human processes or ways of understanding, because it is a freely given gift of God. Calvin reminds the church to lift its eyes to God and to ponder justification in the light of the glory of God. God is to be feared, worshipped and adored. When the knowledge of God confronts humanity, it can see its own state as fallen and broken. Calvin writes that each man should “willingly cast himself down and confess his nothingness” when we come before the power and wonder of God.88

Scripture teaches that God is the Creator, the one who orders all things and before whom no can stand. Calvin writes that we should “not be ashamed to descend from this contemplation of divine perfection and to look upon ourselves without flattery and without being affected by blind self-love.”89 In the light of God’s wonder human pretence to righteousness is stripped away as the depths of human sin and helplessness are shown. Justification takes place as the believer sees themselves as they truly are before God. Despite our failings, Christ embraces the believer and allows them to stand confidently before God. The Christian life is possible because God has willed it and in Christ has opened a path to life. In humility, the believer can receive God’s free justification. Calvin writes “we may see how much favour our abasement has before the Lord, so that the heart cannot be opened to receive his mercy unless it be utterly empty of all opinion of its own worth.”90

Calvin teaches that it is the work of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies believers.91 Through the leading of the Spirit, believers are continually mortified in the flesh and are “consecrated to the Lord in true purity of life, with our hearts formed to obedience to the Law.”92 The good works that might be evident in the life of the believer spring not from the work of the

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., III.xii.1.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., III.xii.4.
90 Ibid., III.xii.7.
91 Ibid., III.xiv.9.
92 Ibid.
individual, but from God’s Spirit dwelling within and bringing forth fruit. The “good works” that the Spirit brings forth in the life of the believer are part of the saving work of Christ. Calvin is seeking to emphasise that salvation from grace is more than just a starting point; it is the entirety of the Christian life. He writes “And Paul does not say to the Ephesians that we have the beginning of salvation from grace but that we have been saved through grace, ‘not by works, lest any man should boast’[Eph. 2:8–9].”

Justification is a work of the Triune God. Humanity receives mercy from God in the gift of justification and regeneration in Christ. This enables humans to live lives of thanksgiving and praise toward their merciful Father. The fruits of justification are not a cause for human pride or honour, but reasons to praise and thank God.

Christian Freedom
Calvin teaches that the end goal of justification is the glorification of God. God’s wonderful grace has set the believer free from the power of sin so that they might glorify God. Under the heading of Christian freedom, Calvin discusses the pastoral implications of the doctrine of justification. He writes that “freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power.” He notes the risks that it can lead to a kind of antinomianism. He writes that some on the basis of freedom “shake off all obedience toward God and break out into unbridled license.” However, Calvin offers his teachings on Christian freedom within the context of his discussion on the Christian life. This means that Christian freedom is understood against the backdrop of his teachings on faith, repentance, the Law and the work of the Holy Spirit. Freedom is defined in relation to the work of Christ. Calvin’s teaching on justification as a pastor of the church offers assurance to believers that they are justified before God. This helps to resource the believer in navigating the Christian life. Since God justifies the believer on the basis of grace instead of good works, the believer is freed from the continual efforts to earn their salvation. Justification is a gift of grace. Calvin writes that “For our assurance, our glory, and the sole anchor of our salvation are that Christ the Son of God is ours, and we, in turn, are in him sons of God and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, called to the hope of eternal blessedness by God’s grace, not by our worth.”

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93 Ibid., III.xiv.11.
94 Ibid., III.xix.1.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., III.xvii.1.
section, we will summarise Calvin’s teaching on Christian freedom and see how they bear witness to a reality animated by the purposes of the sovereign God.

Calvin teaches that Christian freedom can be understood in three parts. The first part of Christian freedom is about how the believer perceives themselves before God. The conscience of the believer is set free, and they are no longer hoping for justification from the Law or their own efforts. This means that the believer looks only to Christ who has obtained justification for us. The believer is set free from Law righteousness so that they enjoy trust in God’s free justification. The believer is no longer pondering their justification under the Law. This does not mean that the Law is no longer useful for believers for it continues to teach and guide Christians. Calvin writes that “The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness, for we have been called to sanctification [1 Thess. 4:7; cf. Eph. 1:4; 1 Thess. 4:3]. Here it is the function of the Law, by warning men of their duty, to arouse them to a zeal for holiness and innocence.” There is an eschatological element to the freedom of the conscience. Freedom is based on the liberating work of Christ. Commenting on Paul’s teaching in Galatian 4, Calvin writes that “through the cross they are free from the condemnation of the Law… so that they may rest with full assurance of Christ alone.”

The second part of Christian freedom is concerned with the transformation of the inner disposition of the believer. Calvin writes that “freed from the Law’s yoke they willingly obey God’s will.” Justification assures the believer of their standing before God, and therefore they do not fear retribution or punishment for their failure under the Law. Instead, if the believer is “freed from this severe requirement of the Law… they hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God, they will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow his leading.” Freedom generates a desire to live according to the will of God, despite the continual presence of sin in our lives. It transforms the Law from an oppressive instrument that condemns people to a gift that reveals God’s will and calls us to greater holiness.

The third part of Christian freedom explores how the believer's relationship with God enables them to enjoy the gifts that God has given. Calvin writes that “regarding outward things that are of themselves ‘indifferent,’ we are not bound before God by any religious obligation

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97 Ibid., III.xix.2.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., III.xix.3.
100 Ibid., III.xix.4.
101 Ibid., III.xix.5.
preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them.”

He suggests that there are many things that we concern ourselves with that lead people to not be at peace before God. Freedom lets us “use God’s gifts for the purpose which he gave them to us.” This requires a knowledge of God and a knowledge of God’s purposes which is revealed to us in Scripture. The exercise of Christian freedom requires discernment. We saw in chapter 1 that Calvin teaches that piety is necessary to receive the knowledge of God. Piety is a disposition of trust, reverence and humility before God. Christian freedom is understood and exercised in complete dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit. It grows from the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit who guides the believer through the teachings of Scripture.

Christian freedom is the gift of God that comes as the believer is justified by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. Christian freedom enables the believer to lift their eyes from concerns about earning justification through their works and looking above to God. This enables the believer to live as God intends, guided by the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes that “it is the part of a godly man to realise that free power in outward matters has been given him in order that he may be more ready for all the duties of love.”

Prayer

The life of the justified believer takes place in a context where we require constant help to be faithful. Prayer is the act by which we seek the aid of God. Calvin’s account of the Christian life assumes that humanity lacks the capacity to be saved and therefore must look outside of itself for help. In his goodness, God reveals Himself in Christ and unites us to Himself by the Spirit that we might have life. Prayer is the response to the revealed goodness of God by which we seek this aid outside of ourselves. It is enabled by the working of the Spirit. Calvin writes that “it is… by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father.”

Calvin’s teaching on prayer is deeply pastoral and attentive to the challenges of following Christ in a fallen context. He suggests that prayer is profitable for the believer and in the title of the chapter of the Institutes dealing with prayer describes it as “the chief exercise of

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102 Ibid., III.xix.7.
103 Ibid., III.xix.8.
104 Ibid., III.xix.12.
105 Ibid., III.xx.5.
106 Ibid., III.xx.2.
Prayer takes place in the context of faith in Christ. As we pray, we are awakened from our blindness and dullness in order to be focused on God. God commands that believers pray, “not so much for his own sake as for ours.” Prayer flows from an inner life of faith and strengthens and assures the believer of God’s benevolence toward them.

Prayer is an exercise in telling the truth and giving voice to the reality that has been revealed by God. When the believer prays, it is from a position of humility where they understand themselves as sinful in deed and in nature. When a believer comes before God to pray he “abandon[s] all thoughts of his own glory,” and “cast[s] off all notion of his own worth.” Instead, the believer comes before God and pleads for pardon. This is an expression of the knowledge of ourselves that emerges when the Spirit imparts the knowledge of God to us in Scripture. We gain the confidence to begin our prayers and seek reconciliation with God because of the faith implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The believer comes with pleas and petitions trusting God’s promises.

Prayer is marked by hope in God. Believers trust in God’s promises that their prayers will be answered. Assurance is not just freedom from anxiety, but something deeper. Calvin writes that “for the saints the occasion that best stimulates them to call upon God is when, distressed by their own need, they are troubled by the greatest unrest, and are almost driven out of their senses, until faith opportunely comes to their relief.” Faith gives “hope for escape and deliverance” as it looks from a context which is marked by sin and suffering to the reality that God has revealed and the promises that God has made. Prayer acts to pierce the darkness of the context and allow the light of God’s grace to shine forth and guide the believer in the ways of Christ.

Prayer is central to the task of discernment. The Christian life is guided by the teachings of God in Scripture. However, we have seen that Scripture can only be understood through the Spirit interpreting God’s words in our inner life. The ongoing presence of sin means that human judgement is not sound. We have seen within Calvin’s teaching that inconsistent

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107 Ibid., III.xx.
108 Ibid., III.xx.1.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., III.xx.8.
111 Ibid., III.xx.9.
112 Ibid., III.xx.11.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
interpretation of Scripture is possible for even the best teachers of the church. We are not competent to interpret Scripture on our own terms. Prayer is the act of submitting to God’s guidance and seeking the Spirit’s teachings.

Prayer, the chief expression of our faith, helps to sustain us through the midst of these struggles by assuring us of God’s sovereign will and purposes and calling us to look beyond the immediate context to God’s promises.

The Eschatological Sovereignty of God

Calvin’s teaching on the Christian life calls the believer to turn their eyes to Christ. Calvin teaches that the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to the entire Gospel. On the cross sin and evil are put to death, and the resurrection is the first fruits and seal of God’s promised intention for creation. God is to be glorified and enjoyed eternally, and death shall have no dominion because God has shown Himself to be sovereign over death. The cross and resurrection are eschatological events. They reveal that God’s sovereignty needs to be understood eschatologically. This section will demonstrate the Christological and Pneumatological basis of Christian hope and argue that it offers the church significant resources for proclaiming the sovereignty of God and navigating the present context faithfully.

Christian hope is Christological. Hope means to set our minds of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Calvin teaches that the experience of a context that is marked by the experience of death is not the sum of reality. In the face of the struggles and temptations of life, Calvin directs the church to the resurrection of Jesus. Hope is borne from our union with the resurrected Christ. Calvin directs us to 2 Corinthians 4 where Paul tells us that we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:11). Our union with Christ leads to a full engagement with the present context and all the challenges and tension it presents, whilst simultaneously directing our gaze to the promised resurrection. Calvin writes that “whenever we consider the resurrection, let Christ’s image come before us.” It calls the believer to lift the eyes beyond what we can see and to God’s promises and purpose. Calvin writes that “whatever hardships distress us, let this ‘redemption’ sustain us until its completion.” Calvin teaches that the “joining together of

115 Ibid., III.xxv.1.
116 Ibid., III.xxv.3.
117 Ibid., III.xxv.2.
Head [Christ] and members that indwelling of Christ in our hearts – in short, that mystical union... so that Christ having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts which he has endowed.”

Our union with Christ unites us not only to the sufferings of the cross but also to the power of the resurrection. This is the source of Christian hope. Calvin writes “if believers’ eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will at last triumph over the devil, flesh, sin and wicked men.” The cross and resurrection belong together and remind us of the whole work of Christ.

The Christian life is lived in the present which is at odds with the reality that is revealed in Christ. This present life – or context – is marked by sin. Sin tempts and calls the believer to seek their happiness and fulfillment on earth. However, the believer's mind is “stunned by the empty dazzlement of riches, power and honours” and “becomes so deadened that they can see no farther.” Calvin suggests that many of the sufferings we experience are God reminding us of the fleeting nature of the world and calling us to lift our minds to heaven.

Union with Christ changes the way in which the believer understands time. Time should be understood as a creation of God. In his teachings on creation, Calvin directs the reader to Basil the Great’s sermons on creation. Basil teaches that the sovereign God is not constrained by anything and is beholden to no-one. This means that God stands outside of creation and is free from the limits of creation – including the passage of time. Basil preaches that “the birth of the world was preceded by a condition of things suitable for the exercise of supernatural powers, outstripping the limits of time, eternal and infinite.” Although Calvin is often cautious in discussing time and space, not wishing to engage in speculation beyond the teachings of Scripture, Basil’s sermon proclaims that God has created time and therefore God is sovereign over time.

God’s sovereignty over time is central to understanding the resurrection and its implications for creation. A human understanding of time is linear. Time proceeds from the future into the past. Humans are conditioned by their experience of what has passed, and these experiences

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118 Ibid., III.xi.10.
119 Ibid., III.ix.6.
120 Ibid., II.xvi.13.
121 Ibid., III.ix.1.
122 Ibid., I.xiv.20.
shape the time that flows through our lives. TF Torrance describes this as “the time of an existence that crumbles away into dust, time that runs backwards into nothingness.”\(^\text{125}\) The believer is liberated from this notion of time through their union with the crucified and resurrected Christ. The resurrection of Jesus reveals that the passage of created time does not constrain God. In Christ God has overcome death, and Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come on the Last Day. Calvin writes that “Christ rose from the dead so that he might have us as companions in the life to come.”\(^\text{126}\) Calvin is writing of a notion of time that can only be perceived through faith and hope in the resurrected Christ. In this sense, Calvin is offering a vision of reality where time is centred around the cross and resurrection of Christ. Considering this reality, the believer can trust that reality is ordered according to God’s intention. Calvin writes that the resurrection of Jesus “is a firm foundation to support our minds, provided we are not wearied or irked with a longer delay; for our task is not to measure minutes of time as we please but patiently to wait until God in his own good time restores his Kingdom.”\(^\text{127}\)

Meditation on hope transforms the believer’s relationship with the present. Calvin urges the believer to anticipate God’s promises of future life. At the heart of the Christian hope is Jesus Christ. Our union has significant pastoral implications. Firstly, through the power of the Spirit, the believer’s perception is altered. Calvin writes that “from our rising up with Christ that we must seek those things above, not those on the earth [Col. 3:1–2]”. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the believer comes to hold the present life in contempt. Rather than being overly attached to the present, we should “strive with all our heart to meditate upon the life to come.”\(^\text{128}\) God teaches us that the present life is vanity through the miseries and struggles we experience.\(^\text{129}\) Contempt for the present life does not mean withdrawal. Calvin is not advocating gnostic yearning for a different place. Instead, he teaches us to see the present life, the creation and all that is in it as a gift from God. It is a place where we are shaped, formed and prepared for the life that is to come through our sufferings and sorrows. We should not be wedded to our present life, because in Christ we are made participant in true reality.

\(^{126}\) Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxv.3.
\(^{127}\) Ibid.
\(^{128}\) Ibid., III.ix.2.
\(^{129}\) Ibid., III.ix.1.
Secondly, in Christ, we are made participants in God’s promises. Calvin writes, “we are not only invited through the example of the risen Christ to strive after newness of life; but we are taught that we are reborn into righteousness through his power.”\textsuperscript{130} We will see that Calvin teaches that in Christ the old man dies and a new man is born. A key insight of Calvin’s theology is that enmity between God and humanity has been defeated in Jesus Christ. We move forward and grow “by the discipline of the cross.”\textsuperscript{131} The cross teaches us that the ways of this present context have been judged and overcome. The cross teaches us “contempt for the present life” and enables hope to fill us.\textsuperscript{132}

Finally, by the resurrection, we are assured of our salvation.\textsuperscript{133} Although the experiences of the present life cause pain, sorrow and suffering they do not determine the life of God’s people. Hope proclaims the sovereignty of God in the face of the darkness of present experience. Believers do not need to be fearful because God is sovereign. Calvin teaches that we need not fear death, because Christ has overcome death. Instead, we can look forward to our future life with Christ. He writes that “no-one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection.”\textsuperscript{134}

Calvin’s development of the theme of hope explores the tension between the present context and the reality and ground of the Christian life. Hope lets the believer see beyond the current context to the reality of God, whose coming we eagerly anticipate. Calvin’s teaching on hope hold significant pastoral potential in the face of the challenges of the present life. However, Calvin did not always realise this potential. We have seen that Calvin attempt to answer why some people do not respond to the Word of God results in his double predestinarian doctrine of election. This reflects a human understanding of time. His perception that many people do not respond to the Word of God is no doubt accurate but raises the question of whether these perceptions should form our understanding of God’s sovereign purposes. Rather than allowing the cross and resurrection of Christ to shape the response to the people’s non-response to God, Calvin’s doctrine of election functions with an alternative eschatology where observations of the present, sinful context are indicative of God’s sovereign purpose.\textsuperscript{135} Torrance writes that “the kind of time-relation with which we operate is imported into the

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., II.xvi.13.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., III.ix.1.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., II.xvi.13.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., III.ix.5.
\textsuperscript{135} Torrance, \textit{Space, Time and Resurrection}, 92.
movements of divine love and activity." While Calvin attempts to preserve the sovereignty of God, he does so by appeal to an abstract decree of God and severs the doctrine of election from its Christological roots.

Hope provides pastoral assurance to the church by directing the church to the eschatological sovereignty of God. Hope reminds the believer that God’s will is not constrained or limited by what the human eye can see in the present context. A response to the challenges of the present life that is both Christologically grounded and Pneumatologically shaped can offer the pastoral assurance that Calvin sought in his doctrine of election. In the face of adversity, questions, and struggles Calvin directs us to the cross of Jesus Christ, by which we are conformed to Christ’s sufferings and find our eyes lifted to God’s Fatherly benevolence. Calvin instructs us that meditation on the cross leads us to ponder the resurrection of Christ. In short, when confronted with the tension of living in a fallen context Calvin calls the church to its hope which is borne of faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. This means the church can see the present context as a part of the reality that is animated by God’s sovereign purposes. This enables engagement that is assured and confident that God’s intentions are unfolding despite our present experience.

\[136\] Ibid., 94.
Chapter 5 – Eschatological Hope in Ephesians 1

The sovereign purposes of God animate Calvin’s understanding of reality. Despite the obscuring effect of sin, the truth of this reality is revealed in Scripture by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit grants the believer and the church the eyes to perceive the reality that permeates and transforms the context in which human life unfolds. Calvin teaches that the purpose of human life is obedience to God’s teaching and the glorification of God. The church is the place where this purpose unfolds. God unites believers into the body of Christ by the Spirit, and uses the church to prepare, nourish and transform believers. The church is separated from the world that is marked by sin. It takes its bearings from the revelation of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This enables the church to see the structures of creaturely life being transformed by the presence of the living God. The sin of the present life is overcome by God. However, this reality can only be perceived through the work of the Triune God who transforms the church’s perception. No longer limited by the contours of the fallen world the believers’ eyes are opened to the past, present and future workings of the sovereign God. At the centre of this work stands the crucified and resurrected Jesus to whom the Spirit unites the believer in faith and who enables us to call God “Father”.

The church lives with inherent tension as it strives to be a foretaste of God’s reality amidst a context that is marked by sin. The proclamation of the sovereignty of God is made not based on the lived experience of the church, but through faith in the resurrected Christ. Hope is an expression of the church’s faith in the promised reality that is revealed in Christ. This thesis will conclude with some reflections on how Calvin can help the church receive the teachings on Ephesians 1 and what this means for the church’s life. We will see that Calvin’s eschatological teachings can enable an alternative reading of Ephesians 1 which orientates the church to the revealed will of God in Jesus Christ. This transforms the shape of life and community as we await the fulfilment of God’s promises. Accordingly, we will explore Calvin’s teachings on the Spirit’s work in the church and offer some remarks on the significance of faith and hope for the church’s life as it seeks its identity and vocation as an eschatological community within the unfolding of God’s sovereign purposes.

Returning to Ephesians 1

Calvin states that his intention in teaching and preaching is to help Christians read Scripture. We have seen that his theology is drawn from careful engagement with the Scripture and the teachers of the church. Calvin invites us to ponder the mystery of God. Calvin’s teachings address the whole person – mind, body, spirit and soul – and seek to form believers to follow
in the way of Jesus Christ. The work of the Spirit in the inner life of believers cultivates people who trust and hope in the promises of God revealed in Christ. His teachings on hope summon the church to imagine and trust the future that God has brought to the present through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The revelation of God lifts the believer’s eyes above the present context to the reality of God’s sovereign purposes in Christ. This transforms the believer’s engagement with the present through freedom from the law of sin and ongoing participation in the life of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

The life of the believer and the church are governed by the Holy Spirit. Calvin teaches that the Holy Spirit interprets Scripture for the church. Through this interpretive work the Spirit of the Living God guides the community as it seeks to live faithfully. This understanding of Scripture resists a static reading of the text and calls the church to continual listening and obedience to God’s instructions. Calvin’s exegesis of Ephesians, in his sermons and commentary, shows us that Scriptural interpretation is a theological task. It involves theological decisions which enable the exegete to highlight different aspects of the text. In his exegesis, Calvin rightly identifies the significance of the doctrine of election, especially in his teaching on Ephesians 1:4. However, he allows his doctrine of election to be shaped by his pastoral observations borne from his present context. As a result, Calvin’s preaching and teaching on Ephesians 1 are dominated by a double predestinarian account of election at the expense of the other themes that are present in the text. This approach to the biblical text is inconsistent with Calvin’s teaching that Scripture provide the basis for our interpretation of Scripture.

Calvin teaches that the Spirit teaches the church through Scripture. The Spirit sanctifies Scripture to guide the church. The basis for understanding the Scripture is given by the Spirit in Scripture. We are going to return to Ephesians 1 and explore the eschatological themes in Ephesians 1:15-23 with reference to God’s sovereignty and God’s revelation of his will in Christ. Calvin’s commentary and preaching on these texts will guide us. We will then use these insights to seek to understand Paul’s declaration that we are chosen to be holy and blameless in love (Eph 1:4). What follows is a tentative exploration of the Ephesians text, one that seeks a different interpretation of the doctrine of election, using the eschatological teachings of Calvin as a guide.

In Ephesians 1 Paul teaches the church about the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His teaching is underpinned by a Trinitarian understanding of God and bears witness to a reality that is shaped by the sovereign purposes of God. Calvin teaches that the cross and
resurrection are at the heart of justification of believers and play a key role in shaping the Christian life.

Paul prays that the church in Ephesus would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation as it comes to know Jesus Christ (Eph 1:17). He states that this will open the eyes of the church to know the hope to which it has been called and the greatness of God’s power (Eph 1:19). Throughout his theology, Calvin teaches that Spirit guides and unites the church to Jesus Christ. This is at play in this passage. As the church’s union with Christ grows, the Spirit enables the church to see the truth. Calvin writes that “until the Spirit of God has made it known to us by a secret revelation, the knowledge of our divine calling exceeds the grasp of our minds.”

Paul teaches that a part of the Spirit’s revelatory work is to open our eyes to the Christian hope.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the centre of Calvin’s teaching on Christian hope. The power that God has put to work in raising Jesus from the dead (Eph 1:20) reveals God’s sovereignty over all things. This sovereignty has a Christological focus. Calvin writes that “he rightly enjoins us to contemplate this power in Christ.” The power and the blessings that the church enjoys are hidden from our eyes. The church does not escape the experience of the present context by virtue of its faith in Christ. Calvin writes that “though sin does not reign it continues to dwell in us, and death is still strong.” The church is called to incline its gaze toward Christ and perceive the reality of God’s power at work in the resurrection of Christ.

Calvin confidently declares that God’s sovereign purposes will not be stopped by anything on the earth or in heaven. Calvin preached that “our Lord Jesus Christ is set at the right hand of God His Father, in order that we might be sure that all things are under his control, and that he rules the whole world… so that if we are under his protection we may defy the devil and all our enemies.” Calvin discusses Christ’s sovereignty over angelic beings and highlights that the church’s gaze should be directed not to angels, who are mere ministers of Christ. Instead the church should look to Christ Himself.

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137 Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 134.
138 Ibid., 136.
139 Ibid.
140 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 111.
141 See Jean Calvin, Sermons on the Epistles to the Ephesians, 112-15 & The Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 137-8
In his sermon on Ephesians 1:21 Calvin dismisses the potential contradiction offered by Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:24 on who exercises authority in heaven.\textsuperscript{142} The Ephesians text teaches that Christ has been given authority and reigns in heaven; while in 1 Corinthians Paul teaches that Christ will hand over all authority to the Father. It is an interesting piece of Trinitarian theology that Calvin seeks to resolve through appealing to both John 5 where Jesus speaks of Himself and the Father working together so that humans might know that God is near and at hand. Calvin preaches that this enables us to better perceive the majesty of God and the enormity of God’s grace.\textsuperscript{143} Calvin seeks to resolve the apparent tension through these texts by appealing to the eschatological theme of hope. He teaches that we cannot perceive this clearly at present. Calvin is content to allow the mystery of God to stand. Rather than explaining it in detail, he urges the church to trust that there will be clarity in the fullness of time when God’s promises are fulfilled, and the full majesty of God is shown.\textsuperscript{144}

Paul’s prayer is that the church would perceive the power of the resurrection at work amongst us through the Holy Spirit. Calvin teaches that the explanations of God’s sovereignty offer the church assurance in the face of its experience of the present life. He preaches that “his speaking here of the subjection of the whole world is to show that whatever we have need of, if we can resort to our Lord Jesus Christ, he is able to succour for us.”\textsuperscript{145} The resurrection of Christ reminds the church that what it experiences in the present life needs to be understood against the backdrop of God’s revealed reality in Christ. Reality is not understood based on our experience of the present, but through what God has revealed. Calvin preaches “the Holy Spirit was meant to draw us, thereby, as little babes, and to show that the spiritual benefits are communicated to us by our Lord Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{146}

The sovereignty of God extends over the passage of time. Paul writes that Christ is given a name above every name “not only in this age, but also the age to come” (Eph 1:21). Calvin explores this sovereignty through appeal to Colossians 1:16-18 which teaches that Christ is pre-existent and the head over the church from the beginning.\textsuperscript{147} In his commentary Calvin writes that Paul uses the phrase age to come “to indicate that the excellence of Christ is not

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] Calvin, \textit{Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians}, 115.
\item[143] Ibid., 116.
\item[144] Ibid., 115.
\item[145] Ibid., 116.
\item[146] Ibid.
\item[147] Ibid., 120.
\end{footnotes}
temporal, but eternal; and that it is not limited to this world, but flourishes in the Kingdom of God." Calvin’s teaching on the sovereignty of God needs to be understood eschatologically. Christ’s authority is not limited to the present, nor to human conceptions of time. Christ’s sovereignty is eternal, reaching back before the foundations of the world, and forward into God’s promised future. God’s sovereignty which is unshackled from time offers assurance to the church that Christ who fills all in all (Eph 1:23) governs all things.

Ephesians 1:15-23 offers a vision of the sovereignty of God that is shaped by the revelation of Jesus Christ. Calvin teaches that the fullness of God’s power is shown and at work in Jesus Christ. This demonstrates to us that God is sovereign over death, powers, dominions, principalities and even time itself. Calvin intends that the church draws assurance from this sovereignty and that it be confident as it navigates life in the present age. As Calvin exegetes this passage, he resolves the difficulties in two ways. Firstly, he draws on the witness of other passages of Scripture that help to clarify what the text is referring to. This obviously involves the exercise of Calvin’s theological judgement. However, it is worth noting that Calvin maintains his insistence that we do not speculate on the nature and character of God beyond the teachings of Scripture. Calvin’s second method is to appeal to hope apophatically. Calvin is reluctant to say more than Scripture teaches, and so says little, and urges the church to trust in God’s promises. He teaches that God has shown Himself to be good in Christ, and therefore we can trust that God’s sovereign purposes are good.

Calvin’s teaching on the sovereignty of God in Ephesians 1:15-23 is significantly different from how he speaks of God’s sovereignty in his exegesis of the first half of Ephesians 1. In chapter two we engaged with Barth’s critique that Calvin severs the sovereignty of God from its Christological roots and instead locates it within the eternal decree that some are saved, and others are damned. Within his work on a single chapter of Scripture, Calvin teaches two different understandings of the sovereignty of God. This apparent inconsistency poses a question. What difference does it make to interpret Ephesians 1:1-14 with an eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God?

**Mystery, Assurance and the God of Grace**

Paul addresses his letter to the church in Ephesus whom he describes as being faithful in Christ Jesus. The church’s identity and vocation are found in its relation to the person of Jesus

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Christ. The first chapter of Ephesians can be understood as an exploration of what it means to be a community of saints who are faithful in Christ. The church exists because of the work of the Spirit who unites believers to Christ through faith.

Commenting on Ephesians 1:3, Calvin emphasises that the source of all blessings is God and reminds the church of the call to respond with thanksgiving. In the commentary, Calvin offers only a passing remark on election and deals with it more fully in his comments on Ephesians 1:4. He writes that “to confirm the matter more fully, he rises to the first cause, to the fountain – the eternal election of God.” This blessing comes to the church in the person of Jesus, who also enables the church to call God Father. Calvin offers a Christological understanding of election, which is the source of the church’s blessings.

Paul writes to the church in Ephesus that God “chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4). The reference to God’s choice invites reflection on the doctrine of election and its significance for the identity and vocation of the church. The sovereign God has chosen in Christ to make a people whose life is defined by holiness and love. Nothing compelled God to choose, and thus it is an act of sovereign grace. This sovereignty should be understood in eschatological terms, and so draws the eyes of the believer away from the present context toward the crucified and resurrected Christ. God’s sovereignty over all things means while the experience of the present context is real, it is not the sum of all reality.

An understanding of the doctrine of election that is shaped by the eschatological sovereignty of God revealed in Christ enables a different response to the experiences of the present life. We saw that Calvin sought to interpret Scripture in the light of the non-responsiveness of many people to the preaching of the Gospel. This pastoral question led him to develop his double predestinarian understanding of the doctrine of election. In effect, this limits the sovereignty of God according to what humans can perceive. While Calvin sought to offer pastoral assurance, a richer assurance is available by understanding God’s sovereignty eschatologically. Paul describes this election as “before the foundation of the world.” When read along with Ephesians 1:9-10 that God has made known his mysterious will for the “fullness of time,” our attention is drawn to creation’s purpose in Christ. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching on the cosmic Christ in Colossians 1:15-20. There is a truth that is hidden in Christ that lies beyond the perception of humanity unless the Spirit opens our eyes. It means that our experience of the present should be understood against the backdrop of
God’s sovereign purposes that are revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a source of pastoral assurance for the church that does not rely on speculation beyond the text.

While the doctrine of election retains its central place in this exegesis of Ephesians 1, the character of the doctrine is defined by Christ, rather than an abstract eternal decree. The text of Ephesians 1 offers little basis for a double predestinarian understanding of the doctrine of election. On the contrary, the phrases “to gather up all things in him” (Eph 1:10) and “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23) suggests that in the fullness of time there will be no-one who is reprobate. Calvin, of course, would reject this suggestion. Calvin argues that “election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation.” He argues that those who reject a double predestinarian understanding of election are seeking to subject God to human standards. However, it is possible to argue that Calvin is applying a human understanding of sovereignty to God, rather than allowing our understanding of the sovereignty of God to be defined by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The most responsible reading of the doctrine of election in Ephesians 1 is to trust in the goodness of the God that we meet in Jesus Christ. The whole witness of the Scripture offers hints on the promised future of God, but do not provide enough detail to state conclusively the outcome of God’s plans. This is true of Ephesians 1. There are hints of a universal future promised in the text. However, the whole context of Scripture leaves the details of God’s plan ambiguous. It appears that the central focus of the Ephesians text is not the eternal destiny of individual humans, but rather the centrality of Christ. Ephesians 1 teaches that the doctrine of election finds its focus in Christ, and directs the church to continue seeking the guidance and teachings of Christ as it navigates life in the present context. Ephesians 1:4 is silent on the scope of salvation, and our interpretation should resist the temptation to speculate. Maintaining a “holy silence” can be described as a reverently agnostic response. Lifting our gaze and trusting in Christ reminds us that God is in control. The church can be assured that God’s purposes are unfolding and trust in His mysterious goodness. Contemplation of God’s goodness, rather than speculation, is consistent with Calvin’s teaching on the impenetrable mystery of God’s will.

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Speculation on the eternal destiny of individuals detracts focus from the significance of the doctrine of election. Paul’s grounds the identity and vocation of the church in the sovereign choice of God before the foundation of the world. The doctrine of election enables us to see that the church is not a human creation, but a creation of God. This enables Paul to address the church as “saints” who are faithful in Christ. The church is not worthy of being called saints on its own terms – it is a designation that is only possible by God’s choice in Christ. The identity of the church as saints is not grounded in the works of the community but is a new identity that is received through baptism into the crucified and resurrected Christ. The statement that the church community in Ephesus are “saints” bears witness to God’s work in the life of the church. Firstly, it emphasises that with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has changed in the present life. God is present and at work in the present context and is gathering a community to Himself by the Holy Spirit. It teaches that the truth of the church’s life can only be perceived by faith in Christ.

God elects the church to be “holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4). The purpose of God’s election is transformation. The church is called out of the sinful context to be a sign and witness before God, and the world, of the promises and purposes of God. The context in the passage means holiness needs to be understood Christologically. Humanity lacks the ability to be holy through its own means. However, when God gazes upon the church, he chooses the see the holiness of Christ. The Christological basis of the church’s identity and vocation as “holy” means that it is an eschatological designation. Calvin notes in his comments on Ephesians 1:20, that “Blessedness is shut up in hope, not perceived by the world. The power of the Spirit is a thing unknown to flesh and blood... Christ alone, therefore, is the mirror in which we can contemplate that which the weakness of the cross obscures in us.”

Election – the Basis of the Church

An eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God allows for an alternative understanding of the doctrine of election to emerge. Although the resources for this reading have been developed from the theology of Calvin, it is important to note that Calvin is unlikely to be satisfied with this exegesis of the passage. Yet, as Barth reminds us, the student of Calvin should not be limited to repeating what Calvin has said, but rather learn from

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151 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, 136.
Calvin.152 The eschatology that enabled the alternative doctrine of election to emerge is consistent with Calvin’s teaching on faith and hope. As we turn to Calvin’s teaching on the identity and vocation of the church, we will see the significance of both election and eschatology in Calvin’s teaching on the church.

Calvin’s teaching on the church is grounded in the doctrine of election.153 We have seen that the doctrine of election serves as a buttress to support the doctrine of justification by faith, which reminds us that the church is a work of God. Calvin’s ecclesiology does not require the predestinarian understanding of the doctrine that is offered in Book III of the Institutes. Rather an eschatological understanding of election effectively affirms that God’s free and gracious choice is the basis of the church. Understood against the backdrop of Christ’s resurrection, the doctrine of election reminds us that the gifts of God are not something that humans earn, but something that God chooses to share. It reminds the church of the grace that lies at the foundation of its being. The church is established by God’s gracious election in Jesus Christ. This means our discussion of Calvin’s ecclesiology and the church’s identity and vocation needs to begin with election.

Calvin teaches that the term church refers to “all God’s elect.”154 The church is the community of believers who have been united to Jesus Christ. Calvin explains that we believe in the church because through God’s grace we are members of it. This is based on the doctrine of election. God has sovereignly decreed that believers belong to the church, and that cannot be assailed.155 Calvin writes that “we need not see the church with eyes or touch it with the hands” rather the church “belongs to the realms of faith.”156 God’s gracious election constitutes the church. Calvin warns that this does not mean speculation on the reprobate or elect. God alone knows whom he has chosen. Rather the doctrine of election reminds the church that it exists because the sovereign God has willed it. Therefore, the believer understands that the church is in fellowship with Christ through “the kindness of the Father through the working of the Holy Spirit.”157 This is pastoral teaching which assures believers that the church is secure in Christ, despite the experience of a bitterly divided church.

152 Barth, The Theology of John Calvin, 4–5.
153 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.i.2.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., IV.i.3.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
Calvin addresses the pastoral question of unfaithfulness and sinfulness within the life of the church. Calvin distinguishes between a visible and invisible church. The visible church is the church that we experience in our present life. It includes people who “profess to worship one God and Christ.” However, this church is filled with those who are Christians in name only and exhibit all sorts of ungodliness. Christians are called to “revere and keep communion” with the visible church, despite the failings, and trust that the true church “is visible to the eyes of God alone.”

The Church as an Eschatological Community

Calvin teaches that the Christian life takes place in community with other believers. Calvin also believes that the church is a community of the elect and non-elect. The work of Christ is made effective for the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. This life is lived in community with believers in the creation called the church. Calvin describes the church as a gracious provision from God so that we might “draw near to him.” In this section, we will discuss the eschatological character of the Christian community and explore the images Calvin uses to describe the church.

Calvin’s ecclesiology is centred on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Through the work of the Spirit, the believer is united to Christ, and a new life is birthed in them. Calvin emphasises the ongoing transformation that happens throughout the Christian life and identifies the church as a key place for the nourishment and growth of Christians. Calvin believes that God has created the church to provide constant encouragement, upbuilding and help “that he might provide for our weakness.” Calvin sees the church as the place where the faith of believers was nurtured, guided and developed so that we might “at last reach the goal of faith.” This description of the church is not defined by the experience of the present context, but by the promises of God for believers. The church is the place where believers grow in their faith and are sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit, with the view to making them holy and blameless before God in love (Ephesians 1:4).

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158 Ibid., IV.i.7.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid., IV.i.2.
162 Ibid., IV.i.1.
163 Ibid.
The church’s identity and being is found in Christ who is the head. The church’s faith and hope are borne of its union with Christ its head. Calvin writes that “no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ, our Head.” Calvin teaches that the church looks beyond the present to God’s promise of an inheritance for his children that is based in Christ. Secondly, Calvin notes that this hope is communal hope. Calvin writes “all the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together as are the limbs of a body. They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God. For they have been called not only into the same inheritance of eternal life but also to participate in one God and Christ.”

Calvin locates the source of the church’s hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He writes that “Although the melancholy desolation which confronts us on every side may cry that no remnant of the church is left, let us know that Christ’s death is fruitful, and that God miraculously keeps his church as in hiding places.” Calvin’s teaching on the death and resurrection of Christ are applied to the church’s experience of its present context. Despite the struggles that the church faced in his days, Calvin directed the church to its hope in Christ. This is a pastoral assurance that is borne out of the person and work of Christ.

In his teachings on the nature of the church, Calvin emphasises the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The church is a community who is in fellowship with Christ “through the workings of the Holy Spirit.” In Book III of the Institutes, Calvin describes the Spirit as separating the believer from the world and as “the root and seed of the heavenly life in us.” Calvin consistently teaches that the Christian life is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s power that enlivens the church community. Rather than living according to the flesh, the church lives according to the will of God.

The Spirit’s work in the life of the church can be described as sanctification. The Spirit takes creatures and forms us into a community in which we are transformed according to God’s purposes. Following Cyprian, who teaches that there is no salvation outside of the church, Calvin believes that the church is essential for salvation. Calvin uses the image of a mother to

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164 Ibid., IV.i.2.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid., IV.i.3.
169 Ibid., III.i.2.
describe the church. He writes that “there is no other way to enter life unless she conceives us in her womb and gives us birth, unless she sustains us at her breast.” Calvin also describes the church as a school. The ministry that the church offers teaches, affirms, and disciplines the Christian in their faith. All believers are pupils in this school throughout their lives. God teaches in the church through the ministry of the Spirit, who inspires and interprets Scripture for the church. Calvin teaches that the visible church is made of believers and non-believers. Trusting in the promises of God, Calvin urges us to keep communion with the latter. God alone knows those who belong to him, and it is not the church’s role to usurp God’s judgement. While Calvin has the elect and reprobate in mind in his teaching; he is operating with an eschatological understanding of the church. He assumes that in the fullness of time God will exercise his sovereign will so as to determine who belongs to the church and who does not. The teaching that the church is an eschatological community does not depend on a double predestinarian understanding of election. In the face of the apparent unfaithfulness of individuals, the church’s response is to remember that in the fullness of time God’s sovereign purposes will be made known. An eschatological understanding of God’s sovereignty allows the church to hope that all people, faithful and not yet faithful, will be gathered up in Christ.

How God cares for His Church

God is the ruler of the church. Calvin teaches that this authority is to be “exercised and administered by his Word alone.” Calvin’s concern in the shape of the church is that any organisation of the church reflects the teaching of Scripture and ensures the Lordship of Christ. Calvin offered a model of church organisation that sought to reflect this. He taught that God exercises care in the church through the calling of pastors and teachers to expound Scripture. Calvin writes that “He instituted pastors and teachers through whose lips he might teach his own; he furnished them with authority; finally, he omitted nothing that might make for holy agreement of faith and for right order.” Calvin describes this calling as

170 Ibid., IV.i.4.
171 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians, 181.
172 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.i.5.
173 Ibid., IV.i.7.
174 Ibid., IV.iii.1.
175 Ibid., IV.i.1.
delegation. In the description of the ministry of pastors and teachers, Calvin describes God as speaking through the lips of the pastors. Calvin writes that God is working through men “just as a workman uses a tool to do his work.” The teaching ministry in the church is a work of God and remains entirely dependent on God for its content and authority. In the ministry of teaching and preaching, God is continuing to enlighten the minds and open the eyes of believers so that they might grow in faith and hope. This is a sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the church, where God takes parts of His creation and presses them into his salvific purposes.

The two images of church as mother and as school draw attention to the ongoing growth that characterises Calvin’s understanding of the Christian life. It is a community that is centred on the person of Jesus Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. The reality of this church can only be perceived in faith. The reality of the church is found in its Christological centre. On this basis, Calvin can confidently claim three important benefits for the church. Firstly, its foundation in God’s election means that it cannot waver or fall. Secondly, its union with Christ means that Jesus will not allow believers to be “estranged from him”. Finally, the understanding of the church as a work of God means that truth remains in it because truth is dependent on God and not on humans. The growth and sanctification that occurs as believers are united to Christ witnesses to the eschatological character of the church community and the Christian life.

The Sacraments: Eschatological signs of God’s Presence

God instituted the sacraments in order to strengthen and aid our faith. Calvin teaches that the church is renewed in its faith by the hearing of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. Calvin teaches that there are two sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Calvin defines a sacrament as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our conscience the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we, in

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176 Ibid., IV.iii.1.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., IV.i.6.
179 Ibid., IV.i.3.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
183 The debates on the presence of Christ in the sacraments is beyond the scope of this thesis. Calvin teaches on this in Institutes of the Christian Religion IV.xiv-xvii.
turn, attest our piety toward him.” Sacraments are given to “lead us to Himself [God] by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.” The sacraments bear witness, “as a sort of appendix,” to the promises of God. Calvin writes that “the Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word. Secondly, he confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within.” Just like the Word, sacraments are made effective by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes that he makes “a division between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the former, and the ministry alone is left to the later.” This ministry would be “empty and trifling” without the Spirit’s work but is “charged with great effect” when the Spirit’s power is at work.

The sacraments bear witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the believer’s union with Christ. Calvin writes that “baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.” Calvin teaches that baptism brings three things to our faith. Firstly, it is a witness to the forgiveness of sins. Secondly, it serves as an initiation into the church community. Finally, it “shows our mortification in Christ and new life in him.” Baptism into Jesus Christ means to be united to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This means that the sacrament of baptism is charged with hope as it makes effective, through the work of the Spirit, the promises of salvation. The believer is joined to Christ, sanctified by the work of the Spirit and called a child of the Father.

Calvin teaches that the Lord’s Supper is how God who has adopted us as children “undertakes to nourish us through the course of our life.” It is only God in Jesus Christ who nourishes us in our faith, and Calvin teaches that the sacrament was given to strengthen and sustain us “unto true and blessed immortality.” Calvin writes that “Christ is the only food for our

185 Ibid.
186 Ibid., IV.xiv.3.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid., IV.xiv.8.
189 Ibid., IV.xiv.9.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid., IV.xv.1.
192 Ibid., IV.xv.5.
193 Ibid., IV.xv.6.
194 Ibid., IV.xvii.1.
195 Ibid.
soul” and that in the Lord’s Supper God has given a visible sign to bear witness to the mystery of our union with Christ. Calvin’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper is indeed attentive to the eschatological tension in which the church’s life takes place. Reality has been, and is being, transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our union with Christ is to be enjoyed in the midst of this present life. Calvin writes that as we partake in the Supper “we may assuredly conclude that the power of his life-giving death will be efficacious in us.” Whilst we are given assurance of salvation, we are simultaneously invited to look forward to the fulfilment of all of God’s promises.

The sacraments are a part of the Spirit’s ministry to the church. Calvin’s teaching on the sacrament reflects an understanding of God who is actively engaged in shaping the life of the church by the Holy Spirit. The church lives amid a sinful world, and by the sacraments, God enables the church to perceive and participate in His sovereign purposes made known in Jesus Christ. The sacraments lift the eyes of the church to God and seal the church in the preached promises of God so that it is free to glorify the Triune God.

Calvin’s teachings on faith and hope enable the church to hear the promises of God in Scripture. The eschatological sovereignty of God reminds the church that events in history are under the rule of God. In Christ, God steps into the midst of human experience and transforms it by the Holy Spirit. Humanity is united to this saving work by the Spirit who joins us to Jesus’ body. In Christ’s body, the church, God continues to exercise care. In the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments the Holy Spirit nurtures the church so that we might live to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:12). The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit lifts the church’s gaze to Jesus Christ so that we might understand our experiences in the light of God’s sovereign grace that has raised Christ from the dead.

196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
Conclusion

At the heart of the Christian life is the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. This thesis has sought to explore how Calvin’s teachings on the centrality of Christ provide bearings for the church as it navigates a context that is marked by the effects of sin. As Calvin unfolds his teaching on the Christian life, the Holy Spirit plays a pivotal role in lifting our gaze to Christ. The Spirit corrects our perception of reality, offering and interpreting the Scripture to us. We have seen that Calvin’s teachings bear witness to a reality that is ordered by the sovereign purposes of the Triune God. Calvin seeks to explain what this revelation means for our lives as followers of Christ. Calvin consistently teaches us to take our bearings from the risen Christ. His account of the Christian life is characterised by the hope that flows from the empty tomb of Christ and invites believers to lives that praise and glorify God.

Calvin’s commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel can continue to profit the church as it seeks to find its bearings in a rapidly changing context. As our life unfolds in a world where the effects of sin continue to be present, Calvin teaches us to lift our gaze to Christ. In our union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church receives the knowledge of God and a more profound understanding of itself. The crucified and resurrected Jesus teaches us of the love of God. The sovereign God has freely chosen to act in Jesus Christ to save the world that He loves. The resurrection reminds us that God’s sovereignty extends over all things in creation, including death. Sin and death cannot halt God’s sovereign purposes for fellowship with His creation. The life of the believer and the church unfolds with the assurance of God’s sovereign care. In these concluding paragraphs, we will note two implications and opportunities for further study that flow from our exploration of Calvin’s teachings on eschatology, election and the sovereignty of God. Firstly, we will note that the believer’s and the church’s identity is founded and assured by God in the person of Jesus Christ. Secondly, we will note the role the Spirit plays in Christian formation in the church and finally some brief comments on the hope-filled community of Christ.

Identity of the Believer and the Church

The teachings of Calvin can help the believers and the church understand their identity and vocation as the eschatological people of God. Christian identity and vocation are theological questions. The theological question applies to both the individual and ecclesial dimensions of the Christian life. Thus, in seeking to understand the Christian life we lift our gaze to Christ. We are led to the transformative relationship God has established with us through Christ in
the power of the Spirit. Calvin teaches that the believer is set apart by the work of the Spirit and united to the crucified and resurrected Christ. It is, therefore, God who defines the identity and work of the believer.

God’s gracious decision is the starting point for the Christian life. The person is encountered by the love and grace of God who, by the Spirit, reveals the truth of God’s grandeur and human sinfulness. The Spirit’s work brings repentance and new life in Christ as the believer submits to the teachings of the Gospel. In this gracious encounter, the work of Christ justifies the sinner before God and liberates them from the ways of sin. The old life defined by sin is put to death in Christ, and a new life in Christ begins.

Calvin teaches that the church is essential for the Christian life. The Spirit unites believers to the body of Christ, the church. The church is a creature of the Spirit, and united by the Spirit’s work to the crucified and resurrected Jesus. The former lives of its members do not determine the church’s identity, but the purposes of God. Calvin teaches that the Spirit’s work in uniting believers to Christ’s body forms a new community. In its union with Christ, the church is freed from its bondage to the power of sin and made a participant in the unfolding of God’s purposes. Christ’s death and resurrection proclaim that the challenges, and desolation of the present context cannot stop God’s purposes of uniting people to himself. The present context is not the sum of reality and so does not form the church’s identity. Instead, the mystery of God’s will is disclosed in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:9) narrates a reality in which the believer and the church find their identity and purpose in union with Christ. Calvin’s eschatological understanding of the sovereignty of God contains the potential for further study on the role of eschatology in shaping Christian identity.

Further research on Calvin’s teaching on the theological nature of the Christian life has the potential to continue to guide the church in today’s context. Although the challenges faced by the believers and the church in present-day Aotearoa New Zealand are of a different political, sociological and historical nature, Calvin helps us to see that the same issue is at stake. Exploration of the church’s identity is first and foremost a theological task. Calvin teaches that the Spirit’s instruction in Scripture guide the church as it navigates the present. However, his teachings on the doctrine of election are a cautionary illustration of what happens when the present context determines our theological reflection. We saw that a pastoral challenge – rampant unbelief – led to the development of Calvin’s doctrine of election. The context-based starting point severed the doctrine of election from its Christological roots. Today’s church faces the same theological question as it seeks to be faithful in the face of contextual
challenges. Calvin’s teaching reminds us that the relationship with God defines the life of the Christian and the church. The church’s union with Christ shapes its identity and understanding of the present context and not vice-versa. Calvin’s eschatological teachings are a source of assurance to the church when the present context seems overwhelming. Through lifting our gaze to the crucified and resurrected Christ, the Spirit teaches us that God guides and protects His church so that we might praise Him eternally.

*The Ongoing Reformation of the Church According to the Word of God.*

The church is the mother of believers and the school of Christ. It nurtures and forms believers to follow Christ. The church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, plays a vital role in the formation of believers. God speaks to the church when it gathers to listen to Holy Scripture and celebrate the sacraments. Transformation is a gradual process as God forms believers by the Spirit. Through the ministry of the church, God works by the Spirit to transforms believers into the likeness of Christ.

Calvin directs his work to enable the church to receive Scripture and be faithful to Christ. Through Scripture God speaks to the church and instructs it in the Gospel. It is through Scripture that God teaches and forms believers. Calvin teaches that the Spirit interprets the Scripture in the inner life of the believer. The reception of God’s revelation in Scripture is a spiritual task that requires, what Calvin terms, piety. Piety is a disposition of reverence, humility and trust toward God. As such, Calvin addresses his pastoral and teaching work to the entirety of the Christian life – heart, mind, body and soul. Calvin’s teachings are intellectually rigorous whilst having a distinctive pastoral shape. Calvin invites the church to contemplate the sovereignty, grandeur, and mystery of the Triune God of grace. This contemplation fosters the conditions to hear the teachings of God.

Listening to the teaching of Scripture is a spiritual task. It needs to proceed with humility and attentiveness to the mysterious nature of God as the church discerns what the Spirit is saying to the church. Listening to God’s teaching in Scripture is a continuing task. Our doctrines are drawn from our interpretation of Scripture. However, doctrine needs to be continually tested against Scripture. The ongoing presence of human sin means that we need to return to Scripture and listen anew for the teaching of the Spirit. We saw that, even for an exegete of

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Calvin’s calibre, the challenges of our present context can and do cloud our interpretation of Scripture. As we continue to open Scripture, the Living Word of God encounters us and transforms all aspects of our being. Through Scripture, the Spirit of God opens our eyes so that we might see His grandeur and His sovereign rule over all things.

Christian formation is both a task where we see that theology and spirituality are weaved together. Calvin’s teaching on the nurturing role of the church invites further reflection on how today's church undertakes the formation of believers. The church is the place where believers open Scripture. The preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments are tools in the hands of God. God presses the human words of preaching and the physical elements of bread and wine into the service of His salvific purposes by the Holy Spirit. Preaching and the celebration of the sacraments are vital tasks through which the church submits itself to Christ’s sovereign rule.

Living with Hope

The eschatological sovereignty of God enables us to live with expectant joy as we engage with the present context. When we understand darkness, we experience the light of the resurrection, and we trust that God’s sovereign purposes are still unfolding and will be revealed at the fullness of time. Death no longer has dominion and fear is driven out by God’s revealed love. Believers are freed from the suffocating power of sin and liberated for participating in God’s sovereign purposes.

We are free to live as children of God. Calvin’s teachings show that the present context, though marked by the effects of sin, is not to be feared. It is not the sum of reality. Instead, it is a place where God is working by the power of the Spirit. Faith and hope imparted by the Spirit enable the church to see beyond the darkness to God’s eternal purposes in Jesus Christ. When believers take their bearings from Christ, we are liberated from the effects of sin so that we might live to the praise of God’s glory. The believer is free to enjoy and profit from the world God has made in the service of God’s sovereign purposes of love.
Bibliography


