Beholding the Image: Vision in John Calvin’s Theology

by

Franklin Tanner Capps

Date: ___________________

Approved:

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Jeremy Begbie, Supervisor

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G. Sujin Pak

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Douglas Campbell

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J. Todd Billings

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Sarah Beckwith

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to expound the role of vision in John Calvin’s theology. Given the many-sided and often confusing—sometimes even apparently contradictory—nature of Calvin’s account and use of the category of vision, I set out to illuminate the implicit and deeply rooted coherence of his thought on this topic. Calvin’s treatment of vision consistently intertwines two fundamental elements: (1) a theological interpretation of the literal, bodily sense of sight, and (2) the use of sight as a metaphor for comprehensive, penetrating ’spiritual’ understanding. A dominant strand of scholarship, along with much popular thinking about Calvin, tends to regard him as either an extreme iconoclast or, if the visual is acknowledged as playing a role in his theology, as always insisting on recourse to ‘the word’ over against the visual. (The word, for Calvin, encompasses both Jesus Christ as ‘Word’ and ‘words’ proclaimed or spoken about Christ, including, for example, the Christian sermon and sacred Scripture.) By contrast, I contend that visual patterns of thinking pervade his thought, even without recourse to the word, which is to say the use of language to describe or clarify the visual. To this end, I propose that his theological use of vision is best elicited according to an implicit distinction between simply ‘seeing’ (frequently, specere) things as they appear to present themselves—that is to say, perceiving a thing isolated from God and all other created things; and ‘beholding’ (frequently, aspicere) things as they truly are—that is to say, understanding a thing in relation to God and, by extension, to all other created things. Seeing indicates the superficial perception of some thing, grounded in mere physical perception, while beholding indicates dynamic vision, which may also be called ‘insight,’ involving the exercise of faith, in which some thing is comprehended in relation to the
divine and thereby to all other created things. While beholding may or may not entail physically seeing an object, it does require that a thing be understood in relation to its source and end, which, according to Calvin, is God. Seeing and beholding are related in that both are modes of visual comprehension—involving a range of modes of visual encounter, from literal sight to mental picturing to singular visual manifestations of the divine—though seeing is a relatively diminished mode of visual comprehension in relation to beholding. Around this seeing-beholding distinction I organize what I call Calvin’s ‘theology of vision.’

The bulk of this dissertation is occupied with an exposition of Calvin’s theology of vision. After developing an account of it, I close by drawing out some of its implications for current debate in theological aesthetics. I suggest that Calvin gives us theological tools for articulating the mystery of humanity’s visually mediated encounter with divinity in a way that encompasses but is not reducible to the traditional concepts of aesthetic experience and aesthetic action.
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While the groundwork for this dissertation was laid at Duke, the majority of the writing took place at St. Andrews University in Laurinburg, North Carolina, where I started teaching shortly after beginning work on the first two chapters. To my colleague
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Introduction

The Question of Vision in Calvin’s Theology

1.1 Seeking the Visio Dei

In this dissertation I deal with one of the most insufficiently studied topics in John Calvin’s theology—the role of vision in his understanding of the nature of humanity’s encounter with God. I will refer to this as Calvin’s theology of vision and will explore the various ways vision shapes his treatment of fundamental theological questions.\(^1\) In order to show the range of ways vision functions in Calvin’s thought, I will focus on three distinct literary units within his theological corpus. First, his analysis of vision in passages from the biblical commentaries, particularly his comments on prophetic vision from books of the Hebrew prophets, as well as his comments on the Pauline and apostolic characterization of humanity’s visual encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Second, the role of vision in his eucharistic tracts and treatises, particularly the way the sacramental symbols bring about visual contact with the risen and ascended Jesus Christ in the midst of what Calvin characterizes as earthly bondage under the flesh. And, third, the role vision plays in his doctrine of the knowledge of God, or theological epistemology, as developed in the Institutes, particularly as he narrates the process of moving from failed attempts at comprehending divinity to an eventual encounter with it that is summarized in the Pauline formula from the Corinthian letters that we shall “with unveiled face, behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (anakekalymmenō prosōpō tēn doxan Kyriou katoptrizomenoi), which is the beholding of “the radiance of the knowledge of the glory

\(^1\) For my full discussion of the category ‘theology of vision’ and its usage in this dissertation, see chapter 1, parts 1.2.1–1.3.1.
of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (phōtismon tēs gnōseōs tēs doxēs tou Theou en prosōpō Iēsou Christou).

Reformed theologians and reformation historians alike have routinely searched for a central organizing theme in Calvin’s thought. He has, for example, been described as a “theologian of transcendence,” and called the “theologian of the word” or “theologian of the spirit,” sometimes the “theologian of word and spirit,” epithets that intend to underscore what many have taken to be the most prominent features of his thought. However, as one might assume, there is no ostensible ‘center’ to Calvin’s theology, and indeed these sorts of summary statements risk making simplistic what is quite complex, inadvertently leading to the neglect of important features and contours of his work. (Surely the protean nature of the interpretation of Calvin is a testimony to the intricacy, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and wide-ranging scope of his thought.) Be this as it may, these designations can in fact be useful as starting points insofar as they call our attention to structural elements and themes in Calvin that may otherwise have been missed. Therefore, I suggest that a compelling—and perhaps surprising—way of approaching the reformer is by thinking of him as a ‘theologian of the eye,’ a title that no doubt sits uncomfortably with famous stereotypes that cast him as a champion of the exclusivity of ‘the word’—both proclaimed and heard—and dour critic of images, the visual arts, and anything related to the possibility of ‘seeing God.’ With these things in view, my task will be to show that visual concern permeates Calvin’s theology in such a

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4 With respect to ‘Calvinist’ political theology, Michael Walzer has traced the ‘radical politics’ that emerged from Calvin’s doctrine of the ‘objective word’ in his classic (and controversial) study, Michael Walzer, The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
way that it is not a tangential matter but central to some of his most fundamental convictions about the nature of humanity’s relationship with God.

1.2 The Relevance of this Project to Recent Research: Historical Theology

This project seeks to engage two basic areas of research related to Calvin (and the study of reformed theology broadly conceived). The first is historical-theological. In exploring the ways visual categories shape and inform Calvin’s thought I am necessarily involved in the broader matter of how some of his intellectual precursors handled the topic, given that certain assumptions about vision were part of a wider intellectual inheritance. To introduce this aspect of the project, in chapter 1, I will offer a schema of two broad fields for the analysis of Calvin’s theology of vision. First, I will deal with the nature of vision itself by engaging Aristotle’s De Anima, a foundational, if speculative, treatise that describes vision as arising from the dynamic inscription of mental pictures on the soul. This will lay groundwork for considering some basic tensions that sit at the heart of any theological or philosophical account of vision that comes after Aristotle. It will also serve to introduce one of the most important themes in Calvin—the relation of the material to

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5 It is intentional on my part to leave ‘reformed theology’ in lowercase letters. Though this departs from the tradition of capitalizing the designation, I do so to emphasize that Calvin was part of a diffuse, largely decentered movement that he did not himself dominate, but participated in as one among many others. In Richard Muller’s words, “As examination of the Reformers indicates, they consulted one another, discussed and debated doctrinal issues, and did not offer any indication that the formulations of one theologian had preeminence over another.” Richard A. Muller, Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 22. Bruce Gordon’s comments also favor this view: “Calvin lived and worked as part of a network of scholars and churchmen whose influence on him was decisive. Without Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli, there would have been no John Calvin as we know him; without the partnership of his near contemporary Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, Calvin might well have been thrown out of Geneva a second time.” Bruce Gordon, John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 7–8. Channeling the spirit of Muller’s work and Gordon’s general sentiments, my decision to leave ‘reformed’ un-capitalized is meant to underscore the fact that the subsequent ‘reformed tradition’ that Calvin helped induce was anything but monolithic and settled—and, indeed, this remains the case today.
the immaterial, an important thread that will be traced through duration of the dissertation.

Second, I will comment on the perennial question of the idol and 16th-century reformed Protestant polemics against material relics and religious images. In their respective studies of iconoclasm in the 16th century and the aniconic religious traditions that emerged after the initial wave of Protestant reform, historians such as Carlos Eire and Margaret Alston intimate that Calvin’s thoroughgoing critique of religious images precludes the possibility of any positive theological account of vision or affirmation of the sense of sight’s ‘goodness’ in his theology. Alain Besançon’s characterization is representative:

God [according to Calvin] does not teach through simulacra [i.e., visual media] but through his word. [According to Calvin] to claim that images serve as books for the unlearned is simply to show that the church has abdicated its duty to transmit that word: ‘The simple reason why those who had the charge of churches resigned the office of teaching to idols was, because they themselves were dumb.’

I shall take a different line, arguing that the reformer’s anxieties over images must be understood as part of a larger, subtler theology of vision that is not fundamentally critical or dismissive of the visual, but draws a contrast between the ‘idolatrous gaze’ and the true vision of God. As I intend to show, the idolatrous gaze is not the final goal of vision

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for Calvin. Rather, the goal of vision is the visio Dei mediated first by creation and then encountered preeminently in the glorious face of Jesus Christ on the way to the final consummation of all things in the age to come. However, his deep-seated anxieties over images and thoroughgoing criticism of material ‘aids’ in Christian worship must be acknowledged and fully accounted for if we are to understand the positive and constructive potential of vision in his theology. Therefore, attending to the question of Calvin’s idol-anxieties is absolutely crucial for this study, as we seek to uncover the nature and form of the vision of God—one centered on the manifestation of the visio Dei in Christ—that Calvin envisaged as the proper end of created, contingent sight.

In laying out these two fields as context, I am not arguing for direct or sole influence of any of the figures or movements that will be discussed. Rather, I simply wish to consider intellectual resonances that may be present between Calvin and his intellectual antecedents and contemporaries who also thought a great deal about the theological significance of vision. Therefore, to summarize, I am interested in pursuing two distinct but related lines of argument. First, while scholars have often characterized Calvin as one preoccupied with idol polemic and the privileging of ‘the word’ as well as divine transcendence over against sight and an affirmation of the inherent goodness of the material world, there is in fact a rich theology of vision in his thought that upholds vision as one of the chief means by which we encounter God. Second, in order to properly understand Calvin’s iconoclastic tendencies, we must place the logic of his critique of

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8 As has repeatedly been pointed out, tracing the various philosophical and theological lines of influence on Calvin is notoriously difficult (and typically leads to dead ends). As Jon Balserak writes: “Calvin was generally the kind of thinker who readily made the ideas of others his own, thus making connections between himself and his predecessors and contemporaries virtually impossible to trace.” Jon Balserak, Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin (Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 2006), 19. See also Anthony N.S. Lane, John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 11–3.
idolatrous worship within this broader framework, one that accounts for both the positive
and negative theological possibilities of vision with respect to the objects of the created
gaze.

1.3 The Relevance of this Project to Recent Research: Theological Aesthetics

The second area to which this dissertation seeks to contribute is theological aesthetics.⁹

Here I am interested in deploying Calvin, as a fountainhead of reformed thought and thus
as a distinctive voice in Western Christianity, to broach questions on the significance of
seeing in theological aesthetics. While the term ‘aesthetics,’ a product of 18th-century
German philosophy, would certainly be foreign to him, he nevertheless has much to say
about the theological import of vision when it comes to the literal sense of *aesthēsis* or
*aisthētikos*, “of or relating to perception by the senses,”¹⁰ for Calvin returns time and
again to consider the delight and terror of encountering the visual manifestation of God
through the things that are made. We shall see that for Calvin the vision of God is not
about mere perception, but has to do with the de-centering and reorienting of the whole
person as a consequence of divine self-revelation manifest in the visual encounter.

To provide a frame of reference for this category ‘visual encounter,’ it is worth
noting that in one major strand of aesthetic theory, the emphasis has fallen squarely on

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⁹ This project should be understood as standing in continuity with the trend of reassessing Calvin as a
resource for contemporary constructive theology. Representative recent studies include: J. Todd Billings,
University Press, 2008); Matthew Meyer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the
Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011); Julie
Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B.
Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010); and Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY:

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “aesthetic.” See also John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and
Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
experience—of making or observing artifacts (not necessarily limited to works of art) in service of contemplation as a function of *theoria*. In another major strand of aesthetic theory, the emphasis has fallen on the performative capabilities of the human as an agent who makes artifacts by modifying and manipulating the material world as she finds it. This second strand has to do with theorizing the character of aesthetic *action* in bringing things into (and out of) existence from preexisting material (again, not necessarily limited to works of art). Aesthetic experience and aesthetic action, then, are two quite different things—the former having to do with the passive reception of an object as it is presented to the conscious subject and the latter having to do with the variety of activities required for bringing about a ‘novel’ object.

Framed theologically, aesthetic experience concerns humanity’s contemplation of God facilitated through objects deemed sacred through religious use. In contrast to this contemplative, experiential model, aesthetic action is concerned with humanity making and using objects as part of religious devotion; it attends to the variety of actions that are performed when humans act on and with artifacts in response to the revelation of God in the world. While experience and action are certainly components of Calvin’s theology of vision, I suggest he provides tools that help us move beyond these two basic aesthetic modes. That is to say, Calvin’s fundamental insights concerning vision move us past the terms of bare experience, as he consistently appeals to the mystery of humanity’s encounter with divinity through vision, which we have called the *visio Dei*. Calvin’s

13 Compare to Maritain’s re-presentation of the Schoolmen theory of art, which he argues is grounded in the distinction between the speculative and practical orders, the latter being further divided into orders of doing (concerned with *telos*) and making (concerned with *productive action*). See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 8–10.
doctrine of the vision of God has three general attributes: (1) it is a divine gift that comes from outside the creature, (2) it is a vision determined by God, which is to say this vision has as its source and end the one who grants it; and (3) this vision gives rise to the transformation the one who sees, as her vision moves from the revelation of God mediated through created structures to the contemplation of God mediated through the image of Jesus Christ.

In considering what Calvin’s thought might have to contribute to the field of theological aesthetics, I intend to reinforce the argument that vision is indispensable to his understanding of humanity’s encounter with God. I will delve into the myriad ways he deploys vision in his description of humanity’s aesthetic, sensuous encounters with divine self-revelation. This is divinity as it is set before the face of the world. As I shall explore in greater detail when I parse the language of aesthetic encounter in the closing sections of this dissertation, the divine, for Calvin, is at once, to paraphrase William James, a primal and enveloping reality to which we feel we must respond, but it is also a mediated reality. As Douglas Ottati helpfully describes the creature’s encounter with God:

[It] is always mediated in and through our encounters with other objects and realities, for example, our apprehensions of dependence on particular circumstances, persons, communities, and institutions. Every alleged encounter with the divine is thus also an encounter with something else at the same time. What we are to notice is not simply one particular experience called “the encounter with the divine” in a way that is analogous to an encounter with [mundane things], but a depth dimension of many ordinary encounters.

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14 I have not been able to discern any consistent language or vocabulary in Calvin that captures his conception of what I am here calling humanity’s ‘encounter’ with God. A thorough study of Calvin’s linguistic habits—particularly in the Institutes, where ‘encounter’ is glossed in English translations as “illumination,” “showing forth,” “appearance,” and so forth—with respect to this concept could turn up interesting conclusions, but this is not a primary concern of the present work.
I suggest that aesthetic encounter, as distinguished from aesthetic experience and action, points to the shocking and primeval nature of God’s revelation in the world, a self-unveiling that can neither be fully captured by language nor entirely comprehended by any single sense faculty. The event of the *visio Dei*, as Calvin parses it, has to do with humanity being brought back to confront the roots of its own creatureliness and contingency. Moreover, aesthetic encounter signals the vital intercourse of fundamentally distinct entities and realities: God and world, the physical and the spiritual, the Creator and creature (this basic ontological distinction being a cardinal principle in Calvin’s thought). Due to this ontological chasm, I show why Calvin’s theology of vision must be tethered to christology, wherein Jesus Christ is understood as the one who mediates the encounter with God while also manifesting God fully to the world. It is through Christ that we come to a vision of God that coheres with, to use of Calvin’s favorite images, God manifest in the mirror of creation.

With these things in view, I suggest that aesthetic encounter, when expounded theologically, expresses the radical and irreducible discontinuity between God and world, a point of theological necessity that escapes those constructions in aesthetics that privilege the experience and action of the knowing and acting subject. With aesthetic experience, we contemplate material artifacts—seeing, touching, hearing them and so on—and we do so as entities standing in equivalent relation with the things experienced. With aesthetic action we move from contemplation to doing, action that has as its goal bringing some ‘new’ artifact into existence. With aesthetic encounter we are confronted

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16 Tillich pursues this point in his description of “space” as the henotheistic notion of “beside-each-otherness” to which the transcendent God of Israel could not be subjected. See Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 31–35.
with an alien reality that breaks in upon us from the outside, disorienting experience and reorienting action. In this way, God is neither experienced as an artifact alongside material artifacts nor generated through those active processes that produce artifacts in the world. In other words, in the case of aesthetic experience and aesthetic action, we are dealing with the interaction of things of the same ontological order—not so with aesthetic encounter, for it has to do with the intercourse of that which is created and that which is uncreated. It is thus a question of how God comes to be known that sits at the heart of Calvin’s theology of vision, with the more precise questions being how Calvin’s theology of vision holds together an account of the alien nature of divine revelation with the understanding that this revelation is nevertheless mediated, and thus comprehensible, through material structures.

Finally, I take the category of aesthetic encounter to encompass both aesthetic experience and aesthetic action. This theology of aesthetic encounter is here conceived as the broader context for understanding aesthetic experience and action. By this I mean that the creature’s encounter with divine revelation provokes reflection on the nature of the experience of that revelation that then gives rise to the performance of actions in response. This is an important point that I believe Calvin tacitly but fully affirms, which mitigates reading him as affirming a sort of passive reception of divine self-disclosure on

17 In the material that follows, I shall underscore the christological center of Calvin’s understanding of the human encounter with God as ‘alien’ reality. Amy Marga’s comments on Karl Barth’s understanding of ‘alien righteousness’ as entailing a “new subject that we do not comprehend…or even perceive empirically” are germane. She writes: “What Barth describes…is essentially the Reformation concept of God’s ‘alien righteousness’ but with a radicalization that reflects his Christological center and a breadth that approaches the theology of Thomas. For Barth, the concept of ‘alien righteousness’ does not just entail righteousness; it is truly an alien existence and history because it is an existence that is now hidden and wrapped up in the existence and history of Christ.” Amy E. Marga, “Reconciliation in Karl Barth and the New Life of the Justified Sinner in Christ,” in Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., eds., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 229.
the part of the creature in the event of the manifestation of the revelation of God, both mirrored in creation and shown forth in Christ. At any rate, I will briefly touch on the differences between these three aesthetic modes (i.e., experience, action, and encounter) in the conclusion following my analysis of the primary source material. These concluding remarks will follow the chapter organization of the dissertation, as I will reflect on the Calvin’s comments on the prophetic and apostolic visual encounters with God, our encounter with the risen flesh of Christ through the eucharistic elements, and Calvin’s visual construal of the knowledge of God.

As should be obvious at this point, this dissertation rejects the notion that reformed thought in general, and Calvin’s theology in particular, has little to nothing to offer contemporary discourses on theological aesthetics and the theological investigation of vision. Admittedly, the tradition extending from Calvin and his contemporaries has been vexed by the question of the image and the theological significance of sight. As Huldrych Zwingli famously declared, “There is no one who is a greater admirer of paintings, statues, and images than I,” and yet when he arrived at the Great Minster of Zürich in 1518, he would decry the form of worship he found there as having “fallen completely captive to the senses (by which he meant the sense of sight).”

Yet Calvin stands apart. In spite of his unequivocal renunciation of ‘carnal’ late medieval Roman Catholic worship, unlike the majority of his reformed confreres, he was adamant that God deigns to be visibly known by humanity, meeting us in the world at the level of both the bodily and spiritual eye: whether in creation or the sacramental symbols, in the prophetic oracles or through stayed contemplation of the image of God present in every human

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18 Quoted in Charles Garside, Jr., *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 76, 93.
being, in the law or the face of Jesus Christ, Calvin is convinced that God is present and available to be visually encountered and thereby known.

1.4 The Dynamics of Seeing and Beholding

Some would be sympathetic to this reading of Calvin that I am proposing. For example, in his instructive study, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, Randall Zachman explores visual themes in the reformer through the rubric of ‘image theology,’ contrasting those ‘dead images’ of which Calvin disapproves with those that are ‘living’ and therefore able to reveal God.\(^\text{19}\) But whereas Zachman makes recourse to proclamation and the aural elements of divine revelation (i.e., ‘the word’) to complete and ‘enliven’ various species of images, material and otherwise, I propose an examination of visual concern in Calvin that attempts to follow as closely as possible the logic of his theological account of vision with only negligible reference non-visual categories (e.g., ‘the word,’ the oral, and the aural). One of the benefits of the approach is that it brings Calvin’s theology of vision into view without threat of clouding it with disparate elements, a problem that crops up in places in Zachman’s work.\(^\text{20}\) This approach will also allow for a better sense of the texture of what I have called the negative and positive aspects of Calvin’s theological account of vision without reducing these elements to simple oppositional binaries (e.g., image and word, vision and speech, and so on). In any case, I would like to stress that this project is in keeping with the stated aims of Zachman’s own work. Following a path of research that has been opened for those of us


interested in theological aesthetics and much-maligned ‘visual contemplation’ in the reformed tradition, I want to take seriously what Zachman calls the “centrality of seeing in Calvin’s theology.”

Because of Calvin’s diffuse use of visual categories across his theological corpus, assembling this material under the heading a ‘theology of vision’ presents a challenge, namely of organizing the diverse instances of visual categories in the absence of any systematic statement by Calvin himself. Therefore, I have adopted the strategy of allowing the structure of Calvin’s theology of vision to emerge from the texts under consideration, highlighting what I believe is a consistent motif. In each set of texts, I trace the movement between seeing to beholding the revelation of God. I define seeing in Calvin as the superficial perception of some thing, characterized by the passing, ephemeral gaze. By contrast, I define beholding as dynamic vision, which I will also at times call insight or comprehension, involving the exercise of faith in which something is understood in relation to God, and thereby truly known. Seeing and beholding are related in that both are modes of understanding flowing from humanity’s visual experience of the world, but it remains the case that seeing is a diminished, subaltern form of understanding in relation to beholding. In short, we shall see that for Calvin humanity encounters something of the revelation of God at every turn, but this encounter does not ensure proper understanding—one may see but not understand, while another beholds with understanding.

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22 And in those cases where the gaze is more than ephemeral, seeing is opened up to the possibility of an idolatrous fixation with the thing.
23 My use of the terms ‘ beholding,’ ‘insight,’ and ‘comprehension’ is determined by Calvin’s own uneven usage, particularly in the Institutes, where he describes the true vision of God as a matter of beholding God “near and up close.” In addition, when he wishes to emphasize the unmerited nature of this form of revelation, he suggests that humans are given insight into or comprehension of God in a way that they could not according to their corrupted natural capacities.
I ought to make it clear that I am not suggesting the seeing-beholding dynamic was deliberately developed by Calvin to frame what I am calling his theology of vision. Rather, it is largely implicit, arising from the logic of the broader arc of his theology, which, as I have already noted, itself has no explicit center or organizing principle. Therefore, I use the seeing-beholding dynamic as a heuristic and organizational tool for clarifying Calvin’s thinking about vision, particularly as visual categories are used to describe the human encounter with divine revelation in the world.

1.5 The Structure of this Study

In order to execute the reading proposed above, in chapter 1, I begin by contrasting the category ‘theology of vision’ with that of ‘visual theology,’ the latter being a pervasive, if vague and underdeveloped, category in the field of theological aesthetics. By analyzing these concepts, I show that, strictly speaking, a theological explanation of vision (i.e., theology of vision) is developed in Calvin’s thought rather than a theology mediated through images (i.e., visual theology). I argue that it is only with regard to a theology of vision that Calvin can be said to utilize vision as part of a grander theological superstructure. I then sketch two broad fields as contexts for thinking about a theology of vision in a figure like Calvin. The first has to do with the metaphysics of visual perception as developed in a foundational philosophical text, Aristotle’s De Anima. Although Calvin rarely appeals to Aristotle directly, elements of Aristotelian theory appear to be at play in Calvin, and so it is appropriate to single out De Anima for detailed attention in order to introduce some of the key issues that will emerge in Calvin’s theological treatment of vision. The second field concerns visual threat, or visual error,
often glossed as the encounter with the idol, in 16th-century theology and practice. Dealing with some of the key theological issues associated with idolatry in the 16th century serves to introduce negative aspects of Calvin’s theology of vision. I show that while Calvin participates in a critique of late medieval Roman Catholic worship as centered on an economy of images that is consistent with his Protestant peers, he departs from some of their more radical iconoclastic tendencies by allowing the critique to set the stage for a positive account of the vision of God as shown through Christ, the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper, and creation more broadly conceived.

In chapter 2, I turn to Calvin’s commentaries on the Hebrew prophets and New Testament writers in order to take the first steps towards developing a concrete account of a theology of vision in his thought. In order to setup this section of the study, I explain the significance of the commentaries among the reformer’s other theological works, particularly their role as the creative and exploratory core of his corpus. Drawing on his claim that scripture itself serves to place God before the eyes of the faithful, I suggest that his exegetical labors were aimed, in part, at clarifying the ‘picture’ of God presented in the words of the biblical witness, especially as he admonished turning to scripture in order to illuminate the works of God—which are often obscure to humanity—published throughout creation.24 In other words, I contend that interest in the visual is exhibited,

24 As the reformer famously put it in the Institutes: “For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly.” John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1559 Latin, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 1.6.1. Throughout this dissertation, I will at times refer to the English translation of the 1559 Latin edition of the Institutes, as I do here. At other times, especially in chapter 4, I will refer to the English translation of the 1541 French edition of the Institutes. In order to distinguish between these two editions, all references to the 1559 edition will be identified with the subtitle ‘1559 Latin’ and will include reference to the book,
albeit in inchoate form, in Calvin’s concern to clarify the divine attributes to which scripture testifies, with the goal of showing forth a living image of God that is complemented by the divine works manifest in creation.

The second part of chapter 2 introduces Calvin’s well-known doctrine of accommodation. I use it to connect his treatment of scripture, which is often understood as an aural event, to his understanding of vision as one of the principal sensuous means by which God makes Godself known according to human capacity. My comments on scripture and accommodation serve as the basis for a close reading of select biblical passages that offer accounts of the visual revelation of God. As I traverse Calvin’s explanation of these pericopes, I tease out two argumentative strands. On the one hand, I contend that for Calvin ‘prophetic vision’ is chief means by which God ‘sets before Israel’s face’ both judgment and blessing. As an instance of visual accommodation, the prophetic oracles are not ends in themselves, but anticipate the fuller manifestation of God in the flesh of God’s Messiah. This account of prophetic vision sets up, on the other hand, a detailed look at Calvin’s explanation of the Pauline doctrine of the Christ-mediated vision of God as the end towards which all vision (including that of the prophets) is striving. In keeping with the overarching framework of analysis outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, I suggest that, according to Calvin, though the prophets indeed saw something of God in the oracles, the vision they were granted under the older dispensation was passing, fragmentary, ephemeral, and ultimately subordinate to that given in the self-unveiling of God in the flesh of Jesus Christ—that vision to which the prophets’ counterparts, the apostles, attest.
In chapter 3, I build on Calvin’s use of the Pauline notion that Christ presents the magnified and mediated vision of God. I first examine how the idea is expressed through the dynamics of visual perception in Calvin’s eucharistic theology. Of particular interest is the seriousness with which he takes the materiality of Christ’s glorified body in connection with the materiality of the sacramental tokens, as well as his arguments on the way in which the faithful have access to Christ through material means. Though prominent scholarly accounts of Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments often point to the reformer’s high view of materiality in the sacramental complex (especially when held up against Zwinglian memorialism), they tend to subordinate the material elements to the *verbum sacramentale* (‘sacramental word’) and thereby augment an implicit dualism between the ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ that they intend to circumvent in their reading of Calvin. I respond to these accounts by showing that, for Calvin, humanity is led by the movements of the Spirit from ordinary materials, like bread and wine, upward to the vision of God found in the risen and glorified Jesus Christ. Christ’s body, localized at the right hand of God, never loses its association with the physical world in virtue of the fact that it remains a body, and so there is correspondence between the materiality of the sacraments and Christ’s body. The material of the sacraments, in other words, directs the faithful to contemplate Christ as Christ is, glorified in the flesh. By deploying vision in

25 Brian Gerrish’s influential account of Calvin’s eucharistic theology provides a pertinent example. While Gerrish calls attention to Calvin’s sense of the deep union between God and creation through Christ the Mediator—a union that is manifest with power, for example, in the eucharist—in the end, according to Gerrish, Christ is offered simply as *verbum sacramentale*, as ‘sacramental word’ for spiritual nourishment. As I discuss in more detail below, while Calvin certainly speaks in the manner of Augustine of Christ as ‘living word’ offered through the sacraments, and while he routinely says that the eucharist is food for the spiritual journey, he also speaks of the sacraments as ‘lively images,’ which point to the indispensible quality of material for placing the resurrected and glorified flesh of Christ before the eyes of the faithful. See Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 50–86. Kilian McDonnell’s critical appraisal, which emphasizes the ‘transcendent’ features of Calvin’s eucharistic theology, presents a similar kind of account. See Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 156–205.
this way—where the eyes of faith are lifted from earthly things upward to contemplate Christ’s enfleshed divinity through the ‘mirrors’ of the eucharistic elements—I suggest that Calvin overcomes some of the key tensions in the debate over the spiritual significance of the material sacramental ‘signs.’ Indeed, I argue that this plays out in his insistence that the sacraments are not mere material signs but symbols—visible, physical things that participate, through the Spirit, in the reality of Christ’s glorified flesh that rests at the right hand of God. In addition to developing this reading that privileges the role of vision in Calvin’s eucharistic writings, I also build on material from chapter 2 by attending to the sacramental significance of Calvin’s refrain that the telos of vision is “beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” which features prominently in his writings on the sacraments.

Chapter 4 extends the foregoing analysis and deals with the role of vision in Calvin’s theological epistemology. I begin with an assessment of the reformer’s use of visual analogy and metaphor in his Address to King Francis I from the 1541 French edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Examining the heuristic function of vision in this small document, I highlight the subtle ways that visual concern permeates Calvin’s theological vocabulary throughout the Address. For example, at key junctures, he invokes the dynamics of blindness and sight, illumination and darkness, veiling and unveiling as he presents an apology for Protestant doctrine and practice to the French Catholic monarch. As I point out, these couplets are not insignificant when one considers

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26 Along these lines, Julie Canlis finds Calvin’s use of ‘visibility’ and ‘invisibility’ with respect to the sacramental signs to pose a threat to the more fundamental theology of participation in Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments. As I seek to show, Canlis’s dismay at an encroaching Augustinian dualism is overcome when one considers how Calvin describes the contact that occurs between the visible and invisible, the material and the spiritual, through the vision of the faithful, who are led by the Spirit in the eucharist from material things to the material reality of Christ’s glorified flesh at the right hand of God. See Julie Canlis, Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 164–67.
that the *Address* was aimed at delineating the boundaries between what Calvin took to be ‘true’ and ‘false’ religion. In short, and as I clarify in the body of the chapter, one of the hallmarks of Calvin’s sense of coming to ‘true religion’ has to do with the transformation of vision from earthbound to centering upon God. That is to say, Calvin is concerned with describing the movement from the idolatrous gaze that sees created things either as ends in themselves or as containing God under finite limits to one that beholds created things as part of a Spirit-empowered open testimony to the God who creates and sustains.

The second part of chapter 4 folds these general reflections on the function of vision into an account of its role as part of Calvin’s broader doctrine of the knowledge of God. My analysis focuses on two loci in Calvin’s theological epistemology: the initial encounter with knowledge of God that commences with the inward turn to self-contemplation, and the inseparability of creation and Christ in the mediation of divine revelation.

Beginning with Calvin’s famous declaration that knowledge of self and God are inextricably intertwined, I argue that, for Calvin, the self, like creation, furnishes an initial point of visual contact with God, in that both self and creation function as ‘mirrors’ that reflect divinity. However, due to the corruption of human sense perception and the noetic faculties, the vision of God that we initially experience is ultimately a terrifying one that fills us with fear and anxiety on account of the fact that we cannot see it clearly. (This visual experience amounts to the encounter with the monstrous sublime.) This compels us to flee, says Calvin, in one of two directions—either to the source from which the divine image derives or away from it and into deeper despair. As with his understanding of Christ’s role as the goal of prophetic vision, as well as his treatment of
the living Christ as the end towards which the sacraments are directed, here again we find Calvin deploying christology to overcome the problem of disordered vision. That is to say, Calvin wants to demonstrate to his readers that Christ as Mediator sets before the eyes of faith a true and living image of God, which is a true knowledge of God, one of comfort and rest. Through the operations of the Spirit, who leads the eyes of faith to gaze upon the risen Christ, disordered vision is reordered, enabled to contemplate God both in our inward parts and throughout creation. Christ makes accessible the presence of God that was once perceived as far off and obscure. Thus, to know God is, strictly speaking, for Calvin, to behold the risen Christ, the one who reorders and reframes vision such that it is able to behold God in created things.

I conclude this dissertation by offering broad reflections on how Calvin’s theology of vision can serve the study of theological aesthetics. And so, in sum, through analysis of three different segments of Calvin’s corpus I shall show that he marshals a theology of vision that describes various types of human encounter with divine self-revelation that can then be used to think about an aesthetics of visual encounter that is uniquely reformed, indeed christological and theocentric, in its approach.
Chapter One

The Theological Problem of Vision

Our whole business in this life
Is to restore to health the eye of the heart
Whereby God may be seen.

Augustine, Sermon 85.5

1.1 Introduction

Perhaps due to the incredible power with which the sense is endowed, Christian thought has been perennially drawn to consider the theological significance of vision, both in its literal and metaphorical dimensions. As the popular narrative goes, the Christian faith emerged from the largely aniconic root of monotheistic Judaism. Following the apostolic age, the burgeoning religion came to embrace the possibility of visually representing the divine, albeit with a great deal of care and qualification. This led to the development of robust theologies of the image as well as forms of practical piety that included and celebrated the visual in worship and religious life, with the most sophisticated defenses of these practices arising in the Christianized East.¹ This devotion to images and the ‘visual

ecology’ that nourished them was then decimated near the end of the medieval period with the rise of early Protestant iconoclasm and its preference for the verbal and aural. From its inception in Second Temple Judaism to its splintering in early modernity, Christianity was bookended by image-anxiety leading to an uneven relationship with vision—at times reviling it, at other times embracing it, but never assuming an apathetic or casual posture towards it. This dissertation considers one such figure whose thought encompassed all three of these attitudes, the Protestant reformer John Calvin, for whom the question of the theological significance of vision was not a matter of indifference but, to be sure, of central importance.

In order to setup this study of Calvin, I want to begin by introducing two broad fields for thinking about tensions at the heart of any theological construal of vision: the relationship between material and immaterial vision (as theorized in Aristotle’s *De Anima*) on the one hand, and the issue of visual threat and image breaking as it emerged in early Protestantism on the other. In addition, because this study seeks to contribute to larger discourses on the place of vision in theological aesthetics (particularly reformed theological contributions), I will first tackle the semantics and efficacy of a key term in

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3 I am not claiming these topics exhaust all the contextual material relevant to the study of vision in a particular thinker. I have chosen to introduce these two topics simply because they are the most relevant to concerns at the heart of Calvin’s theology of vision.

the field, ‘visual theology.’ I will contrast it with the preferred term, ‘theology of vision,’ suggesting that this language better serves the central aim of this study, which is to describe the architectonic congruity of Calvin’s treatment of vision across his theological corpus. To this end, before treating the nature of material and immaterial vision and the negative phenomenon of iconoclasm, I will first deal with the conceptual inadequacies bound up with ‘visual theology,’ and then will turn to explain why, from a methodological standpoint, I will deploy the term ‘theology of vision’ in my analysis of Calvin. It is to these methodological considerations that I now turn.

1.2.1 Visual Theology in Recent Writing

The term ‘visual theology’ is a fuzzy one. Taken at face value, it could mean something like ‘visual god-discourse’ or ‘god-discourse about vision,’ obtuse phrases no doubt. Or it

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could simply serve to characterize theological explanations of historical works of visual art. Recent writing on the topic has only made an already difficult category more imprecise and opaque. As we will see, in most cases, it encompasses loose connections between visual art, artistic action, and theology broadly conceived. In his essay, “Expanding the Discourse on Christianity in the History of Art,” James Romaine tries to sharpen the definition, commenting on visual theology’s function as the crossway between theology and art history. He writes:

Visual theology recognizes the work of art as a personal medium, for the artist or the viewer, of a vertically-oriented imagination. Specifically applied to the history of Christianity and the visual arts, this method regards both Christianity as well as the visual arts as establishing a vertical relationship between God and humanity. This method tends to regard the work of art as biblical exegesis. This impact is not just that the work of art, or artist, is regarded as an interpreter of the Bible but that the scholar is an interpreter of the work’s meaning as it is read from the work’s iconographic and formal construction.⁶

Leaving aside what appears to be a narrow understanding of theology as strictly having to do with biblical interpretation, what Romaine suggests is that visual theology is a distinct method by which one analyzes the content of a work of art in order to uncover its understanding of God or rendering of ‘the spiritual’ (or what he calls the “vertical orientation”). Visual theology, then, is the triangulation between three distinct parties—the artist, her visual art object, and the viewer/interpreter of that visual art object.

According to this definition, visual theology occurs in three different registers—with respect to the artist herself (primary actor), the visual art object (the thing produced), and

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⁶ James Romaine, “Expanding the Discourse on Christianity in the History of Art,” in Reenvisioning: Critical Methods of Seeing in the History of Art, ed. James Romaine and Linda Stratford (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 9. It should be noted that Romaine distinguishes ‘visual theology’ as a mode of interpretation from what he calls ‘religious culture.’ The former has to do with the interpretation of visual art with an eye to constructing a system of claims about God (or, in a more minimal sense, an art historical method that is “concerned with the spiritual or Christian content” of an art object), while the latter has to do with describing the uses and functions of visual art objects by religious communities.
the viewer of the object (the passive observer)—which are all bound together through “a vertically-oriented imagination.” As a method of interpretation, visual theology seeks to understand the content of this vertically-oriented imagination through analysis of the formal characteristics of the artwork. It is the explication of visual interpretation.

In his monograph on the electronic art of Bill Viola, Ronald Bernier takes up elements of Romaine’s definition of visual theology. Attending to the artist’s role in this complex of visual theology, Bernier characterizes the artist as one who “offers moments for a self-revealing divine” beneath the veil of “that which is hidden.” In his decidedly apophatic characterization of visual theology, he says that as a method of interpretation, it is a type of “critical-devotional reading,” which “takes seriously the nature of religious art as sacramental, revelatory, and inspirational.” Bernier’s claim is that visual theology is fundamentally concerned with the unique ability of the visual arts to transmute mundane reality in such a way that materiality is laid open to reveal an otherwise hidden sacramental core that serves as an access channel to ‘the sacred’ that isn’t reducible to speech.

Robin Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny pursue a related but slightly different line. Unlike Bernier, who characterizes visual theology as a dialogue between the artist and interpreter over the artist’s visual artifact, Jensen and Vrudny’s chief concern is with the material nature of the artifact largely isolated from artistic intent. They describe visual theology as pursuing “the connections between a creator God and artistic creation.” Given “art’s affirmation of the essential goodness of the material world and its ability to be a vehicle for the holy,” visual theology seeks traces of “the ancient trinity of Truth,

Beauty, and Goodness” that only define “characteristics of the Divine Being” but are also “embodied in the most profound artistic expression.”9 On this interpretation, visual theology is primarily about discerning the analogical connections between (uncreated) divine being and (created) visual art. At a more fundamental level, it reflects on the ways in which material artifacts mediate divine presence—aspects of the true, beautiful, and good—in and to the world.

One problem with this use of ‘visual theology’ is that it conflates “visual art as analogy” with “visual art as vehicle for the holy,” thus ignoring the important distinction between materiality as basis for analogy and materiality as basis for mediation. That is to say, visual art as analogy points to a form of meaning transference that has to do with the consignment of theological knowledge. By contrast, visual art as vehicle for the holy points to materially mediated encounter with divinity. And here we confront one of the most problematic ambiguities at the heart of the designation ‘visual theology.’ Given the imprecise nature of the category, authors tend to slip between using ‘visual theology’ to distinguish between uncreated divinity and material creation, claiming that the two terms exist only in an analogical relationship that precludes a shared essence, and using the category to unite the two terms, implying that material artifacts can somehow mediate divine presence due to an essential ontological (often glossed as ‘sacramental’) unity between God and world.

Similarly, Sigurd Bergmann offers a defense of the primacy of the visual in theology in his sprawling monograph, In the Beginning is the Icon, suggesting visual theology concerns the liberative potential of visual representation. According to

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9 Robin Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny, preface to Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts, Robin Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny, eds. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), x; emphasis mine.
Bergmann, Christian thought, at least in its Western and North Atlantic iterations, has traditionally been dominated by “logos-centric” modes of theologizing that reduce the action of God to mere text and speech. He contends that Christian theology must move beyond preoccupation with the word to develop a contextual “apophatic art theology” that strives to “image” the liberating action of God in creation.\(^\text{10}\) It will affirm “the independent expressive force of the image and the autonomy of visual arts,” and be carried forward by the conviction that God is free to enact liberation within all sectors of creation through a wide range of means, including, or perhaps preeminently in, visual representation.\(^\text{11}\) Moreover, visual theology will attend to the self-determined nature of pictures and their role in affecting human experience. Presumably, Bergmann does not have in mind the traditional notion of the contemplative experience of visual art through the free play of imagination. Rather, he means that when visual art is opened up to possibilities beyond itself, it can become a site of divine liberating action that, once opened, will provoke human response.

Bergmann’s project, then, is oriented towards constructing a theological account of visual art that at once acknowledges visual art’s integrity, dignity, and contextual nature, while also recognizing that it is imbued with emancipatory and soteriological potential that has the potential to move the object outside itself (through self-negation). Therefore, for Bergmann, visual theology is a matter of action, of imaging the liberating action of God in creation without recourse to word or speech.\(^\text{12}\) To return to Romaine’s schema of the three registers of visual theology, it appears that for Bergmann, like Jensen

\(^{10}\) Bergmann, *In the Beginning is the Icon*, 98.

\(^{11}\) Bergmann, *In the Beginning is the Icon*, 109.

\(^{12}\) Here we may note the denial of theology in the speculative mode, that is, theology unmoored from “lived experience.” At risk of oversimplifying, for Bergmann, visual theology is fundamentally a matter of the theological significance of visual art in everyday life.
and Vrudny, visual theology exclusively concerns the coordination of a visual art object and its interpreter, where the interpreter discovers visual art’s liberative capacity that then prompts response. However, unlike Jensen and Vrudny, Bergmann has a more explicit understanding of the need for divine action as the context in which the visual art object and its interpreter perform (derivative) acts of liberation.

1.2.2 Taking Apart Visual Theology

At this point, it should be clear that as a methodological category visual theology is pervasive in recent writing on the intersection of theology, art history, and the visual arts. However, in spite of its prominence in this literature, as the above discussion indicates, there is no settled definition or common understanding of the term, and so there is a significant degree of ambiguity surrounding its efficacy as a methodological category and framework for visual interpretation. This is understandable, because there is the basic awkwardness of reducing visual perception and the phenomenon of sight to speech or writing. This tension is captured in the term ‘visual theology’ itself: when we talk about vision, in either written or spoken form, it is impossible fully to account for all that is involved in the experience of seeing. It appears this issues in a basic contest between the verbal and visual—that language will never entirely ‘capture’ the visual, even though language may do important work in describing vision as a phenomenon. Moreover, when we speak of ‘vision’ or ‘the visual’ we are typically talking about things that can be seen, the act of seeing, the sense of sight, or, in a more abstract and metaphorical sense, a mode of contemplation or recollection. Along with touch, taste, and smell, it is the primary non-verbal way by which human creatures perceive the world. By contrast, ‘theology’ has to
do with language about God, so it is about discourse, utterance, the use and exchange of ideas through words about the divine. No doubt, then, the words ‘visual’ and ‘theology’ form an odd pair, for it would appear to be a category mistake to claim that ‘theology’ can somehow fully account for or do work of ‘the visual,’ or, conversely, that ‘the visual’ can somehow fully function as a mode of ‘theology.’ And yet there is the deep and abiding conviction among theologians and art historians alike that ‘the visual’ should somehow qualify as ‘theology,’ and that images and visual symbols, both sacred and profane, can be and often are appropriated as part of religious devotion. What are we to make of this?

One way of sorting out (or perhaps further complicating) these questions is by briefly considering Nicholas Lash’s distinction between two types of discourse about God, the religious and the theological. He suggests that while religious discourse concerns the practices of a faith, theological discourse is about critical reflection on those practices. According to Lash, theology is no less practical, but it must be separated out from the types of discourse that take place as part of religious observance and the bodily performance of faith. With this in view, we can ask: since vision is intrinsic to human experience, and therefore imbues the practices of any religious tradition, to which discourse does analysis of ‘the visual’ and consideration of ‘the image’ belong? Are these things proper only to one discourse or the other, or do they somehow straddle the religious and theological? If the latter, how should we go about describing the relationship of ‘the visual’ to both religious and theological discourse?

Since it is in the context of religious practice that vision is explicitly put to use, it would appear that ‘the visual’ is proper to Lash’s religious discourse. But surely visual

concepts—such as the image of God, the theology developed around the Eastern icon, or Paul’s notion that divinity can be seen in the face of Christ—also serve a theological purpose. Jensen’s description of images and visual art objects as conduits for theology is instructive. She writes:

[The] assertion…that the study of images is critical to an understanding of history…can logically be extended to a study of theology. Images are vehicles for theology, both at the popular and the official level, both within the institution of the church and outside it, as supports or subversions of mainstream teachings. Images as symbols are filled with unarticulated meaning, in the liturgy as well as in the daily practice of faith. Images as ideas are complex, adaptable, and multivalent. They do not mean only one thing. They encompass the depth and richness of meaning attached to any idea or symbol.¹⁴

According to these remarks, images and the experience of the visual in religious life ought to function alongside textual and verbal modes of theologizing. While she does not necessarily make claims about the superiority of one mode over the other, clearly Jensen thinks that image-based theologizing opens up a greater range of theological possibilities, whereas text-based theologizing tends to narrow them. Considered in the context of Lash’s distinction between theological and religious discourse, Jensen appears to consider images and the visual as belonging to both discourses. On the side of the theological, images themselves can “critically reflect” on the practices of faith, albeit less articulately than their textual counterparts. On the side of religious discourse, images and visual experience are fully embedded within any form of religious practice, and therefore facilitate the bodily performance of faith.

If we take Jensen to be describing yet another version of visual theology in her remarks on the theological potential of images and visual experience in religious practice, then she seems to affirm the claim that vision, on multiple levels, theologizes. That is to

¹⁴ Jensen, The Substance of Things Seen, 46–47.
say, visual representation and the experience of seeing are thought to be unique forms of theological discourse in themselves, set off and separate from (though perhaps complementary with) theology in written and aural modes. Whatever the case, we are pressing against the limits of language and the peculiarity of reducing visual concepts to the terms of linguistic deliberation. Here we discover another key tension at the heart of visual theology: in the attempt to legitimize, for example, an image’s ability to make meaningful claims about God, we run up against the fact that in order for these claims to be intelligible, these visual symbols must eventually give way to speech. While these writers would want to avoid this conclusion, it appears inescapable; even their work, in its effort to explain how visual art might be, for example, “sacramental, revelatory, and inspirational,” is caught in an antinomy: its textual embrace of visual form.

1.2.3 Articulating a Theology of Vision

The accounts of visual theology that we have just outlined bring into view some of the fundamental difficulties surrounding it as a methodological category (and, indeed, any attempt at analyzing vision from a theological vantage point). In an effort to define the concept, or at least offer a charitable interpretation of what Bernier, Romaine, Vrudny, Jensen, and Bergmann might have in mind when they deploy it, two suggestions can be offered. First, at the most general level, visual theology has to do with the role vision plays in any discourse about God. Second, with reference to Lash, visual theology is a concept that extends across religious discourse and theological analysis—it concerns both how vision is embedded within the practice of religious faith and the way in which we critically reflect on the function of vision within those practices. It is in the discursive
movement between religious discourse and the theological analysis of concrete visual artifacts that visual theology comes into view.

However, something about this general definition of visual theology is dissatisfying. It should be obvious that this explanation does not quite cohere with the various ways the concept has been invoked in recent scholarship. This is because the category appears to issue in more problems than it solves—for example, *the relationship, or transition, between the visual and verbal is never explained, but rather simply assumed*, thus undermining the communicative integrity of the visual sign. Therefore, for the purposes of the present study, I would like introduce in its place the term ‘theology of vision,’ a concept that isn’tfraught with the conceptual problems implied in ‘visual theology.’ My use of ‘theology of vision’ concerns, on the one hand, the theological explanation of the phenomenon of vision itself, and, on the other, accounts for the wide-ranging ways vision and the experience of seeing shape a theology, particularly in terms of how theology arises from visual encounters with God and the world. A theology of vision is about critical reflection on the function of vision within a theological program; and as a method of interpretation, it attempts to give an organized explanation of the way that theological claims about God arise from the experience of seeing and being seen by God. In short, it is a second-order category that serves as a framework for organizing the visual features of a particular theological program, invoked for the purpose of clarifying the myriad ways vision shapes theological reflection. In what follows, I will seek to give an organized account of the function of vision within Calvin’s theological program, which is to say I will give an account of his theology of vision.
1.3.1 Roots of Theologies of Vision in Aristotle’s De Anima

It is well beyond the scope of this study to give a genealogical account of the philosophies of vision that descended from the great Hellenistic thinkers through the early, medieval, and early modern periods of Western Christian thought.\(^{15}\) However, from a contextual vantage point, it is important to gain a sense of some of the major assumptions a figure like Calvin inherited from these ancient sources.\(^{16}\) To this end, I would like to consider the theory of vision presented in Aristotle’s De Anima.\(^{17}\) This is a treatise that exercised immense influence on such diverse intellectual movements as the development of medieval Islamic and Latin optics,\(^{18}\) high medieval mystical treatises on

\(^{15}\) One notable study that attends to the Aristotelian background to Patristic theologies of the image is Gerald P. Boersma, Augustine’s Early Theology of Image: A Study in the Development of Pro-Nicene Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). The basic thesis of this work is that Augustine’s theology of the *imago Dei* both relies on and radicalizes the Pauline understanding of Christ as image of God that is filtered through Hilary of Poitiers, Marius Victorinus, and Ambrose of Milan. Boersma argues that Augustine’s theology of the image is unique in bringing together the concept of Christ as image with an equal emphasis on humanity in general as image, a departure from the tradition leading up to Augustine that, Boersma contends, was unable to hold the two elements together. Though it moves us beyond the scope of the immediate argument, it would be interesting to consider the degree to which Calvin either follows or radicalizes these elements in Augustine’s theology of the image. I thank Professor Kenneth J. Woo of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for directing me to this source.


\(^{17}\) Another strand of Greek philosophy that appears in Calvin, and is connected to his use of Augustine, is, of course, Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. While these systems certainly exercise a strong influence on Calvin’s theology of vision, I will focus on the Aristotelian account of the vision of the body and soul, because it offers a much clearer picture of the philosophical and theological issues at stake than that articulated in Platonism. For commentary on Calvin’s relationship with Renaissance Platonism and Neoplatonism, see Charles Partee, “The Soul in Plato, Platonism, and Calvin,” Scottish Journal of Theology 22 (1969): 278–95; and Charles Partee, Calvin and Classical Philosophy (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

\(^{18}\) See Denery, Seeing and Being Seen, 83–84; Olivier Darrigol, A History of Optics from Greek Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–36; and Nader El-Bizri, “Classical
the vision of God, and the development of the doctrine of the soul, particularly in the high scholasticism of Aquinas and others.

I would like to consider how the theory of vision presented in De Anima ultimately bears on two fundamental issues in Calvin: (1) the relationship between literal, ocular vision and the vision of the soul; and (2) the power of vision to mediate between the human experience of the material world and the experience of the immaterial, invisible God. It is well documented that Calvin was intimately familiar with Aristotelian theory concerning the nature of the soul (e.g., late medieval debates over the soul’s immortality and its relation to mind and the mortal body), even though his own account of these matters often assumed a critical posture towards the Aristotelian tradition. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to surmise that even though Calvin may have been critical of aspects of Aristotle (or at least versions of Aristotle filtered through ancient and late medieval Christian theology), he very well could have borrowed from Aristotelian theory on the matter of the intersection of the vision of the body and vision of the soul. As I shall seek to show, my sense is that this is very much the case.

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19 A representative comment on the influence of De Anima on medieval mysticism comes from Nicholas de Cusa, where he explains the relation of the corporeal world (corporalis mundus) to the world soul (anima mundi) by drawing a parallel with the substance and accidents of auditory and visual sense: “It must be conceded that in terms of substance there is only one soul for all things. But all things differ through accidents. For instance, the visual power in man does not differ in substance from auditory power. However, these powers differ accidentally, because it happens that the visual power exists in the eye and not in the ear and more in one eye that is more apt than another in the exercise of its operation.” Nicholas de Cusa, The Game of Spheres, trans. Pauline Moffitt Watts (New York: Abaris Books, 1986), I.CLVII, 75.
20 Denery, Seeing and Being Seen, 4–12.
21 In order to bring this reading of De Anima into closer correspondence with Calvin’s use of these categories, I will at times gloss “literal, ocular vision” with the term ‘physical vision’ and “the vision of the soul” with ‘spiritual vision.’
In what follows, I parse out the relevance of *De Anima* to the two themes stated above. Specifically, I describe two key tensions that grow out of Aristotle’s account of the vision of the body and the vision of the soul. The first is the ambiguous material state of objects taken into the *sensorium*, the seat of sensation in a percipient animal, in the moment of (and the moments following) visual perception. The second is the question of the degree to which vision, in either its physical or spiritual modes, requires some essential *material* base. In addition to introducing fundamental issues that will emerge in Calvin’s theology of vision, this analysis of *De Anima* will have the more immediate relevance of setting the stage for considering image-anxiety and consternation over the sense of sight in early Protestant theology and practice, the topic of the final sections of this chapter.

1.3.2 *The Vision of the Body, The Vision of the Soul*

Insofar as bodily and spiritual vision are posited as distinct faculties, one of the central problems with sorting out their relationship is that it often isn’t clear if the former relates to the latter only by way of analogy or metaphor, or if the two are somehow connected in a fundamental sense. Does vision have to do *only* with physical encounters with material objects, making vision a material and body-bound experience alone and nothing else, or does it go beyond literal physical encounter to include memory, or re-collective modes of vision, dependent upon a sentient soul, where absent objects are ‘seen’ by the ‘mind’s eye’ so to speak? If we wish to say that vision includes both immediate physical and re-collective or spiritual modes of perception, how are these seemingly contrasting types of perception related? To put it in slightly different terms, do physical and re-collective
vision stand in a *bordered, proximate* relationship with one another, such that these two forms of vision are of fundamentally distinct kinds, or is re-collective vision an *extension* of physical vision, such that the former should be understood as a species of the latter?

*De Anima* takes up these questions, offering a powerful theory of mind and mental imagery, as well as offering an explanation of the re-collective capacities of the soul. This made the work a primary catalyst for subsequent philosophical and theological reflection on these topics.\(^{23}\) In the treatise, a “picture theory of mind” is presented where “for the thinking soul (*dianoeticē psuchē*) images take the place of direct perception,” such that “the soul never thinks without a mental image (*phantasmotos*)”.\(^ {24}\) This claim is of a piece with Aristotle’s explanation of imagination (*phantasia*), about which he says relatively little but characterizes as the means by which a person forms opinions about mental images as these images correspond to direct physical perception.\(^ {25}\) For Aristotle, the imagination is the mechanism by which one distinguishes amongst varieties of things—passing thoughts, dreams, or memories of once directly perceived objects—that are taken in through the sensory apparatus and made present to the thinking soul either through direct perception or the activity of recollection. (Mitchell notes the theory of the thinking soul presented in *De Anima* broadly influences what he calls “folk beliefs” about mind, such as the idea that memories are the result of prior impressions of external objects on it, like the persistence of a signet ring’s imprint on a wax tablet.)\(^ {26}\) In short, *phantasia* marks a mode of cognitive activity that allows the thinking subject to construct

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23 This brief account is not exhaustive and relies in part on W.J.T. Mitchell, “What is an Image?” *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 503–37.
and recall images (or prior impressions) for the twin purposes of serving contemplation and guiding action.\textsuperscript{27}

There is, then, in Aristotle a distinction between two types of vision: direct perception, or physical vision, a viewer immediately encountering a physical object, and perception through thought-picture, or re-collective vision, picturing an object that is called to mind in the wake of its absence. He writes:

If to perceive by sight is just to see, and what is seen is color (or that which is colored), then if we are to see that which sees, that which sees originally must be colored. It is clear therefore that ‘to perceive by sight’ has more than one meaning; for even when we are not seeing, it is by sight that we discriminate darkness from light, though not in the same way as we distinguish one color from another. Further, in a sense even that which sees is colored; for in each case the sense-organ is capable of receiving the sensible object without its matter. That is why when sensible objects are gone the sensings and imaginings continue to exist in the sense-organs.\textsuperscript{28}

According to this account, vision through physical structures depends upon the power of the physical eye, while re-collective vision depends on the operations of the imagination working in tandem with the thinking soul. In addition to distinguishing between various objects that enter the sensorium, the imagination also performs a secondary but no less crucial task: “it is the power of reproducing [the impressions left by objects] in the absence of sensory stimulation.”\textsuperscript{29} Put simply, in the absence of sensory stimulation, imagination simulates and replicates. Yet the imagination’s reproductions are not exact. This leads to the obscuring of the material status of the reproduced mental image due to the alteration that takes place in the movement from direct perception to recall. This difference raises two important questions concerning the material status of the thing that was initially perceived physically then later re-collected. First, are these mental

\textsuperscript{29} Mitchell, “What is an Image?” 533n12.
impressions of a physical thing material, immaterial, or something else entirely? Second, how do these mental images relate to the original material objects they represent?³⁰

As one might expect, the ambiguity here turns on Aristotle’s somewhat perplexing account of the material status of the soul, the site where the phantasmotos, the mental picture, takes form in order to make thinking possible.³¹ “The soul cannot be without a body,” he says “While it cannot be a body, it is not a body but something relative to a body. This is why it is in a body, and a body of a definite kind.”³² As Aquinas glosses it, “The human soul is so close to material things that a material thing is drawn to it to share its existence, but in such a way that from soul and body results one existence in one composed thing; and yet this existence is not dependent on the body inasmuch as it is the soul’s existence,”³³ which is to say “the soul” is simply a particular body’s “form of life.”³⁴ Taken together, the suggestion is quite simple: despite the ‘immateriality’ of the soul, there can be no such thing as a soul apart from a material body. Put differently, the human is not composed of two ‘things,’ body and soul, but “is one thing, a besouled body or embodied soul, formed matter or enmattered form.”³⁵

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³⁰ As we will see below in Elizabeth Anscombe’s analysis of immaterial substance, this question parallels that of the relationship between the material body and immaterial soul. That is, do the body and soul dualistically oppose one another, or are they somehow connected at a fundamental ontological level?

³¹ Here we are not concerned with the question of the unity or division of the body and soul. As Aristotle asserts: “It is not necessary to ask whether soul and body are one, just as it is not necessary to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, nor generally whether the matter of each thing and that of which it is the matter are one. For even if one and being are spoken of in several ways, what is properly so spoken of is the actuality” (De Anima ii 1, 412b6–9). Rather, our question has to do with the material, physical status of the soul vis-à-vis the material body and thus the material, physical status of the mental-pictures that take form within it.

³² Aristotle, De Anima, II.2.414a19–22; emphasis mine.


Difficulties arise when we inquire into the material status of vision as it arises from this understanding of the basic body–soul relationship.

When Aristotle’s treatment of the interconnection of body and soul is unfolded with respect to the question of the materiality or immateriality of vision, we find the phenomenon itself straddles the two fields. Vision, according to Aristotle, relates to matter in two ways, one in its direct sense perception of material objects outside the body, and the other in its re-collective capacities, envisioning a thing through the play of imagination, which is somehow distinct from but dependent upon a material body. Vision is, then, ‘material’ insofar as it is dependent upon a body and its sense organs—for example, the eye perceiving material objects outside itself—and ‘immaterial’ insofar as a visually sensed object takes form in the immaterial soul, which can later be accessed or recollected after the material object has disappeared from before the eye.

So what of the material status of so-called sensible objects, those things that exist outside the body but have been taken into the soul as objects of contemplation? As one commentator explains, “In the case of sensing, when a healthy, normally functioning organism that possesses sense organs of a certain sort encounters in its natural, spatially local environment the right sort of object, sensation occurs without much if any volitional control by the sentient subject.” In other words, the object that exists in “its natural, spatially local environment” is “sensed” in an immediate way when encountered by a sentient being with normally functioning sense organs, like the eyes, and this qualifies as a type of knowledge according to the principle that “actual knowledge or knowing is

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identical with its object (*to d’auto estin he kat’ energeian episteme toi pratmati*).”

Sensation simply happens when a sensing subject encounters a sensible object. Put differently, when an object is presented to a sentient subject, she perceives it without discursively proceeding through a series of discrete processes. This sensing is distinct from the soul’s contemplative activity and, indeed, the sensing must precede the soul’s contemplation if a mental image is to be contemplated by the soul. Therefore, we can tentatively conclude that the status of a visually sensed object is ‘quasi-material,’ which is an imprecise way of saying that it is not at all clear whether, according to Aristotle and his later interpreters, vision is to be aligned with the material body and its sense organs or the immaterial soul and its capacity to contemplate objects in their absence.

1.3.3 Immaterial Substance

Elizabeth Anscombe helps sort out some of these difficulties by attending to the notion of ‘immaterial substance,’ thereby exposing some of the errors of pitting materiality against immateriality with respect to pre-modern conceptions of the soul. She points out that for ancient and medieval thinkers—including Renaissance and early modern figures such as Calvin—the line between matter and mind (or soul) differed fundamentally from that drawn by moderns such as Descartes. For it was Descartes who distinguished between the material-mechanical body and the variety of psychological states that “are subspecies of the ‘cogito’, ‘I think’,” the “I” of cognition, which would eventually come to be

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identified with the unadulterated “immaterial.” This directly corresponds to the basic Cartesian distinction between conscious and spatial substances. I emphasize this because it important to understand that what we have called Aristotle’s ‘immaterial soul’ is radically different from the Cartesian notion of the ‘immaterial mind,’ summed up in the first person singular pronoun, ‘I,’ and detached from the material body.

Anscombe suggests that this distinction between the material-mechanical and psychological ushered in the uniquely modern divide between mind and matter, in which the powers of sensation and mental imagery are aligned with the immaterial mind and the powers of nutrition and locomotion with the material body. She writes:

Nowadays the belief in an immaterial mind is exclusively associated with Cartesian dualism…. The idea of the immaterial nature of the soul is now dissociated from its original source, and associated exclusively with a conception of what is expressed by a first person present indicative psychological verb in serious assertoric use. One may have good reason to reject immaterial substance so conceived, and then take it for granted that with that rejection the whole question of the immateriality of the soul is settled. If so, one may believe that any metaphysics of the spirituality of man’s nature has also been discredited.

To put Anscombe’s point in slightly different terms, one may reject the notion of immaterial substance, and thus the idea that humans have something like a spiritual nature. However, to assume that a more or less unified metaphysical theory of immaterial substance grounded in a strict dualism between mind (Aristotle: soul) and materiality (Aristotle: body) persisted from Aristotle to Descartes is anachronistic. “A medieval

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philosopher,” for example, “would have been surprised to hear that sensation and mental images were supposed to be immaterial [in the Cartesian sense],” says Anscombe.\footnote{Anscombe, “On the Notion of Immaterial Substance,” 254.}

In short, it is simply inaccurate to assume that Descartes’s dualism between immaterial mind and material bodies is equivalent to the ancient distinction between body and soul variously conceived. Where ancient and medieval philosophers would have considered the immaterial soul to be substantial in the sense that it is ontologically basic, those influenced by Descartes’s notion of the immateriality of mind would not. This means Aristotelian, Platonic, Neoplatonic, medieval Aristotelian, Renaissance Platonists, and an array of early modern humanists would not have conceived of the soul as immaterial in the sense that it is either ‘substance-less’ or pure act. As Anscombe puts it, “The immateriality of the soul consists at bottom in the fact that you cannot specify a material character of configuration which is equivalent to truth.”\footnote{Anscombe, “On the Notion of Immaterial Substance,” 262.} Hence, for example, Aquinas’s effort to articulate the way in which the soul shares in the body’s existence without reducing it to the corruptible material of the body itself.

If we grant that Anscombe’s assessment of the pre-Cartesian intellectual history is basically accurate, then at the very least we must conclude that someone like Calvin was an heir to some version of this Aristotelian theory,\footnote{This is not to say that the inheritance must be ‘Aristotelian’ in any strict sense, only that the idea that the soul was somehow immaterial (again, in the Cartesian sense) would have been incoherent to him.} and therefore held to some version of an immaterial but substantial soul that correlated with the material and substantial body.\footnote{Interestingly, in one place Calvin explicitly deems Aristotle’s doctrine of the soul superior to Plato’s. He writes, “Plato, in some passages, talks nobly of the faculties of the soul; and Aristotle, in discoursing of it, has surpassed all in acuteness.” John Calvin, \textit{Psychopannychia}, in \textit{Calvin’s Tracts and Treatises}, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 420. This is not mere approbation, for Calvin is relentless in his insistence that the resurrected body will be imbued with the soul’s immortality according to the preserving and sustaining power of divine grace. The body and soul cannot be eternally divided, although they may exist away from one another for a period. And while this is not to suggest that...}
However, we should be careful to note that whatever affinities may exist between Calvin and classical theory, his doctrine of the soul is at bottom theological.\textsuperscript{46} For example, his doctrine of the unity of the body and soul (and the immortality of both) was derived less from philosophical speculation than from the parallel he discerned with the two natures of Christ.\textsuperscript{47} The crucial point is this: we must move forward recognizing that according to pre-Cartesian, pre-modern theory, the vision of the bodily eye and vision of the soul may, in fact, represent different modes of perception, but not in the sense that the soul visually perceives ‘immaterially’ while the bodily eye perceives ‘materially,’ as if these two modalities were absolutely distinct from one another. Though different modalities of perception, physical vision and spiritual vision derive from a single, basic metaphysical unity.

To draw these remarks on immaterial substance to a close, I would like to suggest that Anscombe’s argument has interesting implications for thinking about image-anxiety in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century (and perhaps any instance of pre-modern religious iconoclasm). Her thesis may help make sense of what some scholars have taken to be a basic contradiction (or at least tension) among early modern iconoclasts with respect to their decidedly negative assessment of the religious image (or idol) as ‘nothing’ and ‘useless,’ and yet strong warnings about the power of religious images to draw the faithful into false worship.\textsuperscript{48} As an interpreter harboring Cartesian assumptions might ask: how is it that a


\textsuperscript{48} For representative comments on this tension among the early reformers, see Besançon, \textit{Forbidden Image}, 164, 186–88 and Sergiusz Michalski, \textit{The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant image question in Western and Eastern Europe} (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44–50. The problem shows up with clarity among Calvin’s contemporaries, such as the great iconoclastic Anabaptist, Andreas Bodenstein von
material thing (e.g., a painting, sculpture, relic) can pose any threat to the vision of the soul if it is the bodily eye alone that encounters and perceives it? Put in more general terms, if the bodily eye and ‘eyes of the soul’ perceive in distinct modes, then should it not be the case that whatever the bodily eye perceives is of no spiritual consequence? If one assumes that an early modern figure is operating with the assumption that the vision of the body is distinct from that of the soul, then there should not be a problem, for corruptible materiality would not be able to touch higher, spiritual contemplation.

However, if we take Anscombe’s argument seriously, noting the seemingly widespread impact of Aristotle’s mature theory of the seeing soul, as well as the ubiquity of the ancient notion of the materiality of mental images, then the vision of the bodily eye is anything but adiaphoron, for it directly corresponds to the vision of the soul—hence Protestant polemicizing against the idol as icon of false religion, and thus the demonic hook that could drag both body and soul into hell. Though summarizing ancient Christian iconoclastic attitudes, Moshe Barasch’s comments are apposite:

The problem of the icon [or religious image] arises precisely where theology and anthropology meet, or rather where they part from each other. In other words, the difficulties inherent in the image come to the fore when our knowledge of people’s inability to perceive and experience what is bodiless and invisible…. But it is the very same awareness of the abyss between the divine and the human that contains the rudiments of a different approach to the sacred icon, one that endows it with an almost messianic task.49

Indeed, precisely at the moment when carnal reality appears to overwhelm transcendent, eternal, and invisible divinity by reducing that reality to material images, iconoclastic

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49 Barasch, Icon, 136.
anxiety appears. And this is as much a question of the degree to which humanity can in fact see God as it is an issue of one’s doctrine of God running into one’s anthropological assumptions.

To summarize, I have shown that in De Anima Aristotle developed a cogent theory of vision in which the bodily eye perceives in a mode distinct from that of the soul. If we superimpose Cartesian assumptions onto this ancient theory—presuming the bodily eye sees materially while the soul/mind perceives immaterially—then we could be led to conclude that Aristotle posited a dualistic account of vision ordered around the material/immaterial binary. However, such a reading is incoherent on the grounds that Aristotle never clearly separated mind or soul from the material body. Indeed, the categories of immateriality and materiality are mutually reinforcing in his thought. Anscombe corrects the anachronistic error, showing that a basic notion of the soul as immaterial substance that coincides with the body as material substance extends from ancient Hellenistic thought through early modern theology. It is disrupted only when Descartes developed his theory of the purely immaterial mind in contradistinction to the sensing body.

Given that 16th-century figures like Calvin would have inherited some version of the ancient understanding of the basic composition of the soul and its vision as intimately tied to the composition of the body and its ability to perceive, it is not surprising they would have had significant anxieties over the possibility of a false image of divinity corrupting a person both outwardly and inwardly. It is to a general introduction and analysis of this image-anxiety that I now turn, which I shall use to bring into view some of the more pessimistic elements of Calvin’s theology of vision.
1.4.1 *The Treachery of Vision in 16th-century Theology and Practice*

As we have noted, the degree to which early modern theologians like Calvin were directly influenced by an Aristotelian account of the soul–body relation (and corresponding description of spiritual vision) is difficult to ascertain. But this problem need not preoccupy us. What is important is that Aristotelian theory introduced complex questions for later attempts at articulating the basic relationship between the body and soul and, derivatively, between bodily and spiritual vision.50 Due to Aristotle’s widespread influence, Calvin, like his contemporaries, was not immune to these complexities, largely due to the percolation of Aristotelian theory through centuries of philosophical and theological reflection, as well as the recovery of classical texts by Renaissance humanists. Therefore, what I am suggesting is quite modest: whatever traces of Aristotelian theory may be at play in Calvin’s own analysis of vision is largely incidental rather than the consequence of direct, considered influence.

As we have seen, although Aristotle distinguished between bodily vision and the re-collective capacities of the soul, his account failed to settle the question of the degree to which vision is a *material, quasi-material, or immaterial* (or ‘immaterial substantial’ to use Anscombe’s phrase) phenomenon. Leaving this issue unresolved has unsettling...

effects when it comes to the question of what it means to ‘take something into’ the soul through the sensory apparatus of the bodily eye. If vision arises from the sensing subject’s encounter with material reality outsider herself—such that she initially perceives according to her bodily capacities that eventually give way to perception according to spiritual capacities—then naturally there would be significant consequences when it comes to the question of how the contemplation of objects outside the body might impact the soul. This comes into sharp focus in early Protestant polemics over the appetites of the ‘idolatrous eye,’ an instrument of desire that could draw one into false worship, or veneration of the material thing rather than veneration of the material thing’s creator. Let us, then, turn to the intertwined topics of idolatry and iconoclasm in order to introduce some of the negative features of Calvin’s theology of vision.

1.4.2 Early Protestant Image Breaking

The Christian tradition has always had misgivings over the quandary of the mutual entanglement of the material and immaterial, the earthly and the spiritual. In the face of this, there has been a persistent tendency either towards mixture, as in the most extreme forms of ontological participation theory, or various species of radical dualism, as in forms of ancient Gnosticism or Manichaeism that posited good and evil, light and darkness, as ontologically equivalent substances absolutely opposed to one another. Put in general terms, the extreme participationist tends to emphasize the inherent ‘goodness’ and ‘dignity’ of the material world to such a degree that this world is conflated with divinity, while the gnostic tends to view created matter as a sort of millstone that weighs down the spiritual, restricting its access to the divine nature. In their own ways, both
systems attempt to grant special prominence to the pure contemplation of divinity, often cast in visual terms. The perennial question is whether the physical eye can actually see God, or whether physical vision must be ultimately discarded to make way for pure, spiritual (i.e., disembodied) contemplation of the invisible God.\textsuperscript{51} Clearly, from the side of the ontological participationist, the answer is that the physical eye can indeed see God according to its natural capacities, even though it may have to undergo some alteration before this union through vision is granted; and from the side of the radical dualist, the answer is answer decidedly the opposite—the bodily eye, and indeed the total body of flesh, fundamentally impedes seeing what is immaterial and therefore invisible (and as a consequence it is thought the body must be shed entirely so that the vision of God can be enjoyed).

From ancient thought through the early modern period, vision was the privileged sense, followed by speech and hearing, and finally the ‘dirty’ sense of touch, the lowest and basest because of its intimate ‘bodily’ connection.\textsuperscript{52} However, as Jean-Luc Marion points out, this hierarchy is inherently reductive, for it understates the complex unity-in-difference of the senses that arises from our sensuous interaction with the world. For example, when it comes to vision and speech, there is a vital connection between these

\textsuperscript{51} As Ian Gardner summarizes Manichean thought and practice: “In life the pure of heart will train their gaze upon the gods enthroned in the sun and moon. These ‘palaces’ are visible ‘ships’ bright with their cargo of redeemed light, and also (to think about it in a slightly different way) they are open ‘gates’ through which one can look—if one’s mortal eyes are able—directly into the heavenly world. But that new aeon is not itself the realm of the Father. Rather, there the Primal Man rules as first of the redeemed; and it is not until the process of redemption is finalized, and the enemy completely overcome and rendered sterile—only then can the victorious fighters return to the Father from where they first departed. Thus, we can say that the Manichean teaching…is that God dwells in the light: the Son in the visible, but the Father in what is for now inaccessible.” Gardner, “Mani, Augustine and the Vision of God,” \textit{HTS Teologiese Studies} 69, no. 1 (April 2013): 4.

\textsuperscript{52} As Aristotle famously wrote of the senses: “[They] are loved for themselves, and above all the sense of sight…. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings many differences between things.” \textit{Metaphysica}, in \textit{The Works of Aristotle}, 12 vols., ed. W.E. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908–52), 90a, 24–28. See also Plato, \textit{Timaeus}, in \textit{The Dialogues of Plato}, 5 vols., trans. B. Jowett (Oxford, 1892), iii.466.
sensory capacities: understanding, says Marion, means ultimately coming to see; likewise, speaking aims at rendering some thing visible.\textsuperscript{53} To put the matter in theological terms, we might say that how one comes to see God is intimately related to how one comes to speak about God, and how one speaks about God is a function of how one sees God, even if only in an abstract, metaphorical sense. It is from this complex—the intercourse of the visual and verbal—that a theology of vision begins to come into view, both in its positive or constructive as well as negative dimensions.

But to draw a connection between speech and vision, image and word, does not mean the categories cannot be distinguished. To be sure, for these pairs to be held together, they must be held apart. Similarly, then, to distinguish is not to utterly separate, but the powerful traction necessary for holding these things together is notoriously difficult to maintain. In the earliest stages of Protestantism this was precisely the struggle, particularly in the Swiss cities of Zurich and Geneva, as well as German free imperial cities such as Regensburg.\textsuperscript{54} How could a reformer lodge a critique against what was


\textsuperscript{54} In her short study on the fecundity and eventual abolition of images in Reformation Zurich, Lee Palmer Wandel offers helpful comments on thinking about religious images in the late medieval and Reformation period as hermeneutical devices. She writes: “In speaking of images as ‘language,’ I wish to invoke obliquely the great breadth of discussion on the relation between words and thinking. This leads away from a semiotic conception of images, from a system of signs, to a means of naming and setting relationships. Images, like ‘language,’ are essentially hermeneutic; even when they ‘represent,’ they are interpreting the context within which they are created; and their interpretations shape how people see what the images ‘represent.’” Lee Palmer Wandel, “Envisioning God: Images and Liturgy in Reformation Zurich,” \textit{The Sixteenth Century Journal}, vol. 24, no. 1 (1993): 22. Literature on this topic is quite vast, but key works representing the visual-material ‘turn’ in Reformation studies with a social historical focus include: Robert W. Scribner, \textit{For the Sake of the Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kristin Zapalac, \textit{In His Image and Likeness: Political Iconography and Religious Change in Regensburg, 1500–1600} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Keith Moxey, \textit{Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For an explanation of the various practices surrounding the ‘sensuous’
taken to be a manipulative and exploitative cultic economy reified in images and
ecclesiastical art and at the same time resist going so far as to evacuate salvation from the
world by completely ‘spiritualizing,’ and thereby destabilizing, Christian worship? How
was a reformer to remain vigilant in protecting the community against an idolatrous
affection for images, while also resisting going so far as to recommend they pluck out
their eyes and cast them into the Elbe or Rhone Rivers per the teaching of Jesus Christ
himself? What sorts of practices, both material and theological, needed to be put into
place to protect the lay worshipper from slipping into idolatrous devotion? Considering
some of the different answers given by the early reformers to these questions can help us
understand the antagonism between Luther’s restrained, even at times highly traditional,
criticisms of the medieval church’s use of images and the radical iconoclasm of Zwingli,
Karlstadt, Muentzer, and their followers. Moreover, sketching the basic differences
between these contrasting positions will provide important context for understanding
Calvin’s mediating but decidedly radical position on the problem of the religious image.
Let us, then, begin with one of the most influential discussions of these issues—Carlos
Eire’s analysis of Calvin on divine immanence and transcendence.

1.4.3 From Immanence to Transcendence?

In his classic study, War Against the Idols, Carlos Eire describes the development of
iconoclastic attitudes in the early 16th century, arguing that among early Protestants

and ‘enchanted’ nature of the Mass on the eve of the Reformation, which would give way to a visual
understanding of the host by 1500, see Robert W. Scribner, “Ritual and Popular Religion in Catholic
55 See Karlstadt, On the Removal of Images (1522); Zwingli, On True and False Religion (1525). Though I
shall ultimately distinguish Calvin from these thoroughgoing Protestant iconoclasts, see also Calvin, An
Admonition, Showing the Advantages which Christendom Might Derive from an Inventory of Relics, in
Society, 1844).
image-breaking correlated with the transformation of immanent religion into that of the radically transcendent. On the eve of the infamous year of 1517, Eire says, it was roundly recognized that “the sacred was diffused in the profane, the spiritual in the material. Divine power, embodied in the Church and its sacraments, reached down through innumerable points of contact to make itself felt.” However, by the time the young Calvin caught wind of the reforming activities emanating out of Germany around 1523, “it was no longer possible to take the intermingling of spiritual and material for granted. Among the many changes brought about by the Reformation, none was more visible, or tangible, where it triumphed, than the abolition of this [older] kind of religion,” and so wherever those who rejected the old medieval Catholic piety acquired enough political power, “churches were sacked, images smashed and burned, relics destroyed, sanctuaries desecrated, altars overturned, and consecrated hosts fed to dogs and goats. The religion of immanence was replaced by the religion of transcendence.”

Calvin, says Eire, worked out, in both theory and practice, the most consistent iconoclastic agenda of the early reformers cast in fundamentally negative terms—open conflict with false, idolatrous religion, or what Calvin provocatively called *idolomania.*

One difficulty that presents itself in addressing the iconoclasm question in early Protestantism is sorting out the degree to which one party or figure stressed the transcendence of God at the expense of divine immanence. Eire deals with this by arguing that early Protestantism in each of its manifestations tended toward radical displacement—the embrace of a religion of transcendence that would supersede that of

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the immanent. Aligned with this is the corollary issue of how each reformer’s particular set of theological emphases and axioms impacted their decisions about the practical reform of worship—early Protestant reform being quite varied according to geography and political climate.58 Attending to the differences amongst key reformers on the important issue of immanence and transcendence is preferable to simply treating all Protestant reforming activities as a single, monolithic movement.

According to Eire, three distinct ‘streams’ of reform flowed from the redefinition of ‘the sacred’ following Luther’s attack on the Roman church. First, there was the Catholic stream that persisted in understanding material reality as imbued with divine presence. Second, the Lutheran stream, despite its tireless attack on the Roman Catholic semi-Pelagian preoccupation with ‘works righteousness’ and its troubling implications, showed little interest in promoting radical departure from Catholicism. Third, there was reformed Protestantism that surged “with transcendence…[and] the aggressive rejection of the Catholic cult,” which, Eire contends, came to its fullest, most consistent expression—theologically and otherwise—following Calvin’s work in Geneva in concert with Bucer in Strasbourg and Zwingli and Bullinger in Zurich.59

Again, Eire takes Calvin’s reforming activities and their theological justification to be the most refined and abiding expression of early Protestant iconoclasm. This is of a


59 Eire, War Against the Idols, 2.
piece with his claim that a theology of idolatry is the central preoccupation and organizing concept in the reformer’s thought. He contends:

The superiority of the spiritual dimension over the material dimension is at the center of Calvin’s teaching. Calvin insists that God is always improperly worshiped in the visible symbol, and that ‘whatever holds down and confines the senses to the earth is contrary to the covenant of God; in which, inviting us to himself, he permits us to think of nothing but what is spiritual.’ Idolatry is interpreted by Calvin as the diminution of God’s honor. Calvin repeatedly maintains that some loss of glory comes about through the improper mingling of spiritual and material in worship, since God’s honor is corrupted by ‘an impious falsehood’ whenever any form is attached to him.⁶⁰

Eire’s case rests on the conviction that Calvin’s radically transcendent religious consciousness was rooted in two basic principles. The first is soli Deo Gloria (God’s glory alone), a principle concerning worship; and the second, the idea that the finite and transient cannot contain the infinite and eternal (finitum non est capax infiniti), an ontological principle. Although Eire admits Calvin could not possibly have affirmed the radical implications of the second principle without some qualification—for taken to its final conclusions one would have to say, for example, that Christ’s incarnation was either impossible or a kind of mirage—he is convinced the idea is basic to his theology.

At this point, questions can be raised about Eire’s claim that Calvin consistently stressed that God is improperly worshiped in the visual–material symbol. It is no doubt the case that Calvin repeatedly returns to the idea that divinity cannot be reduced to matter (as though somehow being ‘enfolded’ into matter, as Eire says). To be sure, this is the whole point of his sardonic polemical treatise directed against Latin worship, Inventory of Relics. And Calvin is quite clear that the most crass form of false religion is that which directs worship to an image out of the conviction that divinity somehow

⁶⁰ Eire, “‘True Piety Begets True Confession,’” 252; he quotes Calvin, Inventory of Relics.
secretly abides there. As he writes in the opening of chapter 11 of Book 1 of the *Institutes*, “As Scripture, in accommodation to the rude and gross intellect of man, usually speaks in popular terms, so whenever its object is to discriminate between the true God and false deities, it opposes him in particular to idols; not that it approves of what is taught more elegantly and subtlety by philosophers, but that it may the better expose the folly, nay, madness of the world in its inquiries after God, so long as every one clings to his own speculations. This exclusive definition, which we uniformly meet with in Scripture, annihilates every deity which men frame for themselves of their own accord—God himself being the only fit witness to himself.”

However, there is a wrinkle. As we shall see, Calvin is also quite clear that God deigns to be *known* through material things, and indeed does so often. (Thus, it comes as no surprise that he treats the topic of idolatry within the context of Book 1 of the 1559 *Institutes*, which is titled “Of the Knowledge of God the Creator.”) This idea that God can be known through material means reaches its fullest and clearest expression in his eucharistic theology. The basic idea being that God confronts humanity in the visual–material symbol in order to be *known* according to human capacity. While Eire is correct in claiming that Calvin would reject ‘worshipping,’ for example, the bread and wine of the eucharist as if it literally constituted the flesh and blood of Christ, it is an oversimplification to draw the conclusion from this that for Calvin ‘the spiritual’ is always and everywhere superior to the material. In other words, Calvin’s rejection of

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directing *latria* or *dulia* to a material symbol, about which he is unequivocal,\(^63\) does not entail a rejection of the idea that God can be known through material things, that the material world is to be degraded, or is superfluous to understanding the dynamics of how God is known.

Second, and related to the previous point, Eire’s argument trades on a reductionist dualism between God and world that doesn’t easily map onto all aspects of Calvin’s theology. Simply put, Calvin does not understand there to be a “loss of glory” when God is revealed through material creation, for according to Calvin God is quite happy to condescend to human capacity, revealing himself through “the things that are made” and “according to our lowly capacity” in order that human understanding may ultimately ascend to God. To return to the question of the idol, the problem isn’t the ‘mingling’ of divinity and materiality, but the human tendency to be smitten by the material sign to such a degree that we mistakenly worship the thing rather than allow it to do its proper work, which is to lead us to a reality beyond itself.\(^64\)

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\(^63\) Calvin writes: “The distinction of what is called dulia and latria was invented for the very purpose of permitting divine honors to be paid to angels and dead men with apparent impunity. For it is plain that the worship which Papists pay to saints differs in no respect from the worship of God: for this worship is paid without distinction; only when they are pressed they have recourse to the evasion, that what belongs to God is kept unimpaired, because they leave him latria. But since the question relates not to the word, but the thing, how can they be allowed to sport at will with a matter of the highest moment? But not to insist on this, the utmost they will obtain by their distinction is, that they give worship to God, and service to the others. For ‘latria’ in Greek has the same meaning as worship in Latin; whereas ‘douleia’ properly means service, though the words are sometimes used in Scripture indiscriminately. But granting that the distinction is invariably preserved, the thing to be inquired into is the meaning of each. ‘Douleia’ unquestionably means service, and ‘latria’ worship. But no man doubts that to serve is something higher than to worship. For it were often a hard thing to serve him whom you would not refuse to reverence. It is, therefore, an unjust division to assign the greater to the saints and leave the less to God. But several of the ancient fathers observed this distinction. What if they did, when all men see that it is not only improper, but utterly frivolous?” Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 1.12.2.

\(^64\) See Calvin’s positive use of Augustine’s *On Diverse Questions* 43: “Let them hear Augustine, whom they pretend to regard as a saint. ‘Visible sacraments were instituted for the sake of carnal men, that by the ladder of the sacraments they may be conveyed from those things which are seen by the eye, to those which are perceived by the understand.’” Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 4.19.15.
A final weakness in Eire’s account is its almost exclusive focus on Calvin’s theology of idolatry, or critique of false religion. Were it the case that Calvin single-mindedly aimed to destroy a kind of religious double-mindedness of the sick eye serving the perversions of an idolatrous heart, then one would expect he would only have a negative assessment of vision and its possibilities. This, as we shall see, is not the case for two reasons. First, Calvin’s theology of vision extends well beyond the question of the material image: his negative assessment of vision centered on ‘religious art’ thus serving idolatrous desire is only a component part. Second, Calvin’s understanding of the relation of the physical and spiritual encompasses much more than a basic conflict between materiality and immateriality epitomized in the confrontation between true and false religion that centers on the religious image as idol. By portraying Calvin as primarily a theologian of transcendence occupied with casting down physical idols, Eire’s approach precludes attention to Calvin’s constructive and positive theological account of vision’s encounter with images of various kinds. Eire is therefore forced to ignore those places where Calvin articulates the great wonder of vision and visual encounters with God.

Nevertheless, as an introduction to the fault lines that emerged between early Protestants, Eire provides a helpful description of expressions of reform at the level of large-scale intellectual and social practice. From Eire’s perspective, an understanding of Protestant polemics against Catholic worship is crucial for understanding the

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65 I find Eire’s emphasis on the importance of seeing in Calvin’s doctrine of worship to be a valuable starting point for reassessing key themes in the reformer’s theology. Indeed, Eire lays important historical groundwork for a deeper investigation of the role of vision in Calvin. But to reiterate, the account I offer diverges from Eire’s in that he is concerned only with the negative and destructive elements that flow from Calvin’s account of vision (which is bound up with Eire’s emphasis on image anxiety in early Protestantism), while my account seeks to move beyond these negative elements, pressing towards an analysis of vision in Calvin that takes into account the polyvalent role vision plays as a constructive tool in Calvin’s thought.
development of Protestant dogma. With respect to Calvin’s brand of reform, for example, he insists: “The issue of idolatry was not an adjunct, ‘negative’, or subordinate question for the Reformed, but rather a central, positive organizing theme of their theology and piety.” In other words, Calvin’s theology was simply commentary on the core conviction that God had to be untangled from the world, and that the dross that was the idolatrous, false religion of late medieval Catholicism needed to be burned off (perhaps literally) and ultimately overthrown. This is a bold claim, and not without some warrant given the great deal of energy Calvin and his colleagues spent sparring with Catholic opponents over such questions. As a corrective to longstanding stereotypes of various doctrinal positions (e.g., the ‘Lutheran’ emphasis on ‘salvation by faith alone,’ the ‘Catholic’ emphasis on ‘works righteousness,’ the ‘Calvinist’ preoccupation with ‘predestination’), Eire’s argument is valuable, as it challenges the interpreter to consider the reformers’ core theological convictions afresh.

But in the end, what Eire claims for Calvin is simply too much. As we shall see in the material that follows, it is problematic to reduce a thinker as subtle and complex as Calvin to the terms of a basic preoccupation with idol worship and false religion cast in contrastive dualist terms (i.e., ‘spirit’ versus ‘body,’ ‘transcendence’ versus ‘immanence,’ and so on). While Calvin is no doubt keen to counter the most basic impulses of perverted worship, epitomized in the regular offering of latria to material things, it simply isn’t the case that he “systematically juxtaposed the divine and the human, contrasted the spiritual and the material, and placed the transcendent and omnipotent solus of God above the contingent multiple of humanity and the created world.”67 As I

66 Eire, “‘True Piety Begets True Confession,’” 248.
67 Eire, “‘True Piety Begets True Confession,’” 250.
shall argue, rather than distinguishing absolutely between the uncreated God and finite 
materiality, then extolling the former and degrading the latter, Calvin distinguishes in 
order to correlate. His aim is to articulate the proper relationship between God and 
creation as the basis for rightly ordered vision, which serves as a bridge between the 
world as we think we know it and the mystery of God that confronts us, throwing us back 
into the world in order that we may know it properly and afresh.

To summarize, it is undeniable that a fundamental concern among the reformers 
was to redress what they took to be the carnal piety of late medieval religion. In the case 
of Calvin, as Eire’s influential characterization suggests, the critique was grounded, at 
least in part, in concern over the diminution of God’s glory when God was bound to 
material things. This, says Eire, was rooted in Calvin’s insistence that divinity 
transcended the material world, a conviction that led to an uncompromising emphasis on 
the priority of the spiritual over the material. This conceptual consistency, so argues Eire, 
ultimately manifest itself in an organized iconoclastic agenda in Calvin’s Geneva that 
was both indebted to and distinct from other instances of reformation iconoclasm. The 
questions I have raised here regarding what may be an overly simple (and too easy) 
characterization of Calvin with respect to these issues will be the focus of greater 
attention in chapters 3 and 4. In order to get a sense of the larger theological and social 
contexts in which Calvin was working, let us consider some of the broad features of early 
Protestant perspectives on the image and idol through brief attention to Luther, who 
presents something of a contrastive position to that of Calvin.
1.4.4 Image-anxieties and the Economy of Salvation

The initial impulses of German reform were linked to idol-polemic and an iconoclastic agenda from the start. This is because Luther understood the economy of indulgences to be intimately tied to a network of religious pilgrimage sites, reliquaries, and worship spaces spread across Europe. The neural network of this economy was concentrated in Rome, and so Luther’s attack on papal authority and indulgences naturally affected other areas of late medieval religious life wherever reformation took hold. To be sure, Luther’s initial salvo had to do with economy in the ordinary sense—his fury had as much to do with the financial impact of indulgences, the perceived extortion of funds from German lands, as with the theological rationalization given to defend them. To state the obvious, Luther’s critique utilized a Pauline/Augustinian theology of justification by faith alone in order to dismantle what he interpreted as a ‘works-centered’ soteriological system.

Michalski argues that Luther’s doctrine of justification cannot be underestimated in considering his approach to religious art. Luther often contended that religious art was ultimately of no consequence in the matter of salvation. But at times he also suggested the opposite—that the religious image risked placing a set of demands on the faithful that could undermine the crucial soteriological point that righteousness is freely given by faith and relies on the liberating action of God alone rather than works. In other words, while for Luther images were not dangerous in themselves, insofar as they were bound up with the larger medieval economy of indulgences, penance, and the performance of ‘good works,’ he advised they be approached with care. Accordingly, one’s relationship to and

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69 Martin Luther, Commentary on Romans, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Classics, 1976), 82.
use of religious images was largely to be discerned by each individual conscience rather
than with respect to the broader ethics of the worshipping community.

Luther’s attack on indulgences was an attack on the entire medieval soteriological
system. However, his teaching on the place of images was uneven, being highly
contingent on the social circumstances he was addressing. Following the energetic
currents flowing out of his newfound insights concerning justification by faith, Luther at
times advocated for an explicitly iconoclastic agenda. Scholars such as Christensen,
Michalski, and Wandel have traced some of the lines of this initial reform and its
iconoclastic implications.70 This was because the visual art of late medieval piety was
taken to embody ecclesial authority, especially as these works presented various
representations of Christ whose earthly authority had been delegated to the Roman
church and its papal head. Proto-reformation agitators such as Wycliffe and Huss had
already called this system into question decades before Luther with similar iconoclastic
overtones. Though Luther’s initial impulse was one of cautious but critical engagement
with religious images (no doubt informed by the fate of Wycliffe and Huss), his later
theology would turn more ‘conservative’ due to the threat of political and social disorder
that emerged from radical Protestant factions—Anabaptist leaders, for example, used
image-breaking as a call to arms against the ruling authorities, a call that Luther famously
condemned in his Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (Wider die
Mordischen und Reubischen Rotten der Bawren) of 1525. As he saw it, the breaking of
church art was bound up with rebellion—the active and intentional destruction of the

70 See, again, Christensen, Art and the Reformation in Germany; Michalski, The Reformation and the
Visual Arts; and Wandel, Voracious Idols and Violent Hands.
divine ordering of society—which Luther in his later years found utterly intolerable. As he wrote:

[The peasants] are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs; by this they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers. Furthermore, anyone who can be proved to be a seditious person is an outlaw before God and the emperor; and whoever is the first to put him to death does right and well. For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job. For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed; it makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster. Therefore let everyone who can, smite; slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you.  

If Luther’s thought on the religious image could be summarized—and this concern flows directly from his understanding of justification—it is that the Christian must be free with respect to the use of religious art, and so should be neither compelled to destroy nor forced to embrace it in violation of her conscience. And at the same time, if one so chooses to eliminate an image in the interest of the freedom of the conscience, she must do so with great care, not pursuing such iconoclasm for iconoclasm’s sake or at the expense of the stability of the social order.

Calvin embraces some of these basic elements in Luther’s understanding of the use and place of religious art. However, as Eire rightly points out, Calvin ultimately moves past his predecessor in important ways. This emerges, for example, in his carefully worked out understanding of vision’s necessary place within the doctrine of the knowledge of God, his repeated emphasis on the visual nature of the sacramental symbols

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71 Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (1525).
of the Lord’s Supper, and in his uncompromising condemnation of any religious art that
presumes to represent or capture the divine. Therefore, it was not as if Calvin took a
fundamentally ‘Lutheran approach’ to images and the role of vision in religious practice
then radicalized it. Rather, as I have indirectly indicated, and as Eire’s work fails to fully
account for, Calvin understood the question of images to fall under the more basic
question of properly ordered vision; that is, the question of how one’s eyes should be
trained to behold the glory of the things that are made, visual art included (though not
liturgical visual art), as they exist to serve the greater glory of God. As he wrote:

But upon his individual works he engraved unmistakable marks of his
glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk
cannot plead the excuse of ignorance. Therefore the prophet very aptly
exclaims that he is ‘clad with light as with a garment’ [Ps. 104:2]. It is as
if he said: Thereafter the Lord began to show himself in the visible
splendor of his apparel, ever since in the creation of the universe he
brought forth those insignia whereby he shows his glory to us, wherever
and whenever we cast our gaze.72

But Calvin knew that training the gaze to behold the divine glory is perilous and requires
assistance along the way: prophetic speech is presented “like a painting” before an
audience, scripture “sets before our eyes the very word of God,” and the material-
sacramental signs present the body of the Lord, not as mutilated flesh, but glorified and
life-giving, fit for spiritual food according to humanity’s bodily capacities—and yet each
of these articles risk becoming ‘idolized.’

Crucial to Calvin’s understanding of the image-cum-idol is the notion that
idolatry causes the creature to mistake the true source of power in the world. When she
encounters creation, she should see that God is the all-powerful “Artificer,” the one who
made, orders, and sustains all things. This omnipotent Artificer is, in Calvin's words,

72 Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.5.1.
“rightly judged a wonder worker,” a claim that derives from Calvin’s emphasis on *creatio ex nihilo*.73 However, with the advent and persistence of sin, humanity turns away from God, bending itself down before the things that are made rather than opening itself up to its Creator. As John Leith notes, for Calvin idolatry is fundamentally the creature’s “effort to domesticate God and to conform him to man’s definition of who He should be.”74 Idolatrous worship conflates the Creator and the creation, domesticating the former by making it of a piece with the latter. Calvin writes, “Even though they are compelled to recognize some god, they strip [the true God] of his glory by taking away his power. For, as Paul affirms, just as ‘God cannot deny himself,’ because ‘he remains’ forever like himself [II Tim. 2:13], so they, by fashioning a dead and empty idol, are truly said to deny God.”75 Similarly, he asserts, “Just as soon as a visible form has been fashioned for God, his power is also bound to it.”76 That is to say, when a visible form is fashioned for divinity, the power that belongs only to God is perversely attributed to a contingent, finite thing. As Zachman summarizes Calvin on this point, “Since the powers of God ravish us with astonishment and since the life of God in particular reveals the clear distinction between God and all creatures, the true knowledge of God should correspond to the self-portrait of God given in God’s powers by clearly distinguishing the source of good things of the universe from the universe itself.”77 Once humanity enters into the throes of idolatrous confusion, creation, whose purpose is to reflect the divine glory and power, is degraded and stripped of its significance, and thereby a deviant, artificial glory is

73 Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 1.4.54.
75 Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 1.4.49.
attributed to it. In the event of the redistribution of power through false worship, the human being disrupts and disorders creation’s relationship with God. The only response to this disorder is to actively remove the source of the disruption, which means setting about an iconoclastic agenda, which Calvin and his colleagues did in distinct phases between the years of 1530 and 1536.  

To the contemporary eye, instantiations of Protestant image-breaking in both its moderate and extreme forms, like the ‘logos-centricity’ to which it gave rise, is often viewed as theologically naïve and fundamentally problematic. According to Bergmann, for example, the Protestant ‘turn’ towards word-centered interpretations of the Christian faith set Western Christianity on a course that tore it away from the fundamental problems of life in the world. Others share Bergmann’s view, particularly those who approach the matter from an Eastern perspective. Daniel Hardy, for example, commenting on religious traditions influenced by Calvin, suggests that the reformed emphasis on the word meant their theology had the ability to refer to and present created things from a position of moral neutrality, while at the same time keeping them “essentially invisible.” This, says Hardy, is the heart of the reformed preference for the verbal over the visual.

However, this suggestion is problematic, for it relies on an interpretive framework that utilizes too sharp a distinction between ‘image’ and ‘word,’ speech and vision. Margaret Miles puts the matter succinctly:

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78 See Eire, War Against the Idols, 122–161.  
79 Bergmann, In the Beginning is the Icon, xv.  
Modern historians [and theologians], discounting the religious significance of artistic works and deploving the aesthetic insensitivity of Protestant iconoclasm, often fail to appreciate that sixteenth-century people—reforming leaders, middle-class burghers, and “blue-collar” workers alike—understood that the issue of words and images ultimately and intimately affected their salvation. We, whose sights are trained to this world, can scarcely compensate our own perspective strongly enough in our interpretations of an earlier age.  

The idea that word and image could be entangled in the salvific economy as early Protestants conceived it is no doubt confounding for interpreters who wish to reduce Protestant thought and practice to a basic reflexive iconoclasm. Moreover, this tendency among interpreters gestures towards another inclination (perhaps beholden to facets of the very iconoclasm it wishes to decry), which is to posit that word and image, vision and speech, should not sully themselves with one another. Repudiating a notion of encounter with God through ‘the word’ as fantastically disembodied and overly spiritualized, a reactionary tendency follows, one that tends to cultivate affection for ‘the image’ by fetishizing visual representation such that visual experience is thought to grant worshippers a special, more profound, more fundamental experience of the divine. This reactionary embrace of visual artifacts appears to be as frivolous as attempting to concoct an encounter with God through an unadulterated experience of ‘the word.’ The challenge, then, is to construct an interpretive framework capable of integrating and distinguishing the disparate phenomena of vision, text, and speech.

Along these lines, Majorie O’Rourke Boyle provides a helpful, albeit simplified, starting point for thinking about the shift in representational religious pedagogies in 16th-

century Europe that grew out of iconoclastic attitudes and new understandings of the nature of the image. She suggests, “The religious pedagogy of the medieval centuries, which relied on the visual image, is succeeded by the humanist doctrine of the published text.” Or as Michael O’Connell glosses it, “‘Christ as text’ replaces the painted, sculpted Christ.” The language of succession and replacement implies there was a fundamental break between late medieval and early modern religiosity, at least in terms of modes of representation and perception, the former being primarily visual and the latter primarily textual and aural. The idea, then, is that with the ascendancy of the textual and aural in the mid-16th century, the didactic relevance of visual materials simply fell by the wayside. While it is true there was an explosion of text-based technologies that threatened to displace visual communication in early modernity, it remains less clear that there was a sudden break between these two fundamentally different types of religious pedagogy. As with any major historical shift, these things take time.

No doubt that in early (and later) Protestantism there were virulent strains of iconophobia that outright rejected the legitimacy of religious images and the necessity of vision for understanding God. Indeed, the potency of such movements derived largely

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84 Majorie O’Rourke Boyle, Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 83.
86 One of the most prominent leaders of the Protestant iconoclastic rebellions in Germany was Luther’s Wittenberg colleague, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. On the Luther-Karlstadt debate over images, see Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, On the Removal of Images and “That There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians” (1522), in The Essential Carlstadt, ed. E.J. Furcha (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995) and Martin Luther, Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments (1525), in Luther Works, vol. 40, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 79–143. For secondary works on Luther’s more general relationship to radical reform, see Bryan D. Mangrum and Guiseppe Scavizzi, trans., A Reformation Debate: Karlstadt, Emser, and Eck on Sacred Images, Three Treatises in Translation (Toronto: The Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Victoria University, Toronto, 1991); Mark U. Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975); and Bonnie Noble, Lucas Cranach the Elder: Art and Devotion of the German Reformation (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009).
from iconoclasm’s palpable revolutionary potential. To strike at the cultic images was to strike at the cult itself and all those who managed and maintained it. In this sense, reformation iconoclasm was proxy warfare against the reigning political and religious powers. However, as suggested above, the absolute condemnation of visual representation was never a hallmark of Luther’s nascent reforming agenda, even though it did become a pivotal issue for distinguishing conservative and revolutionary brands of Protestantism. Similarly, his later interpreters neither ignored the question of the visual nor framed the matter in strictly negative terms (though Andreas Karlstadt presents an exception, as he promoted a rigorously iconoclastic agenda). Again, as my reading of Calvin will show, vision and a preoccupation with its positive theological potential persisted in Protestant thought. In many ways Christ, the Word imaged in Scripture, present to all Christians in the life of faith, and curated and proclaimed by the Protestant pastor, was simply a different sort of icon. As Luther famously put it in his Sermon for Those Preparing to Die (1519), “whether or not I will or not when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it.” The issue Luther raises is thus: how ought the Christian encounter, practically and otherwise, this new understanding of the iconicity of Jesus Christ as one imaged through speech? Did this rigorous emphasis on Christ as the proclaimed Word, and thus the one through whom the invisible God was made manifest, require that all lesser testimonies—images and other forms of religious art—be eliminated, or were they to be tolerated? And if they were to be tolerated, on what grounds (theological or otherwise) were they to be?

1.4.5 The Question of Practical Iconoclasm

A central preoccupation in early reformation-era debate had to do with discerning the practical changes in worship that followed from particular theological judgments. It should be noted that in spite of the polemics and lampooning, early Protestants and Roman Catholics shared a great deal in the religious and intellectual worlds they occupied. To the extent that a reformed thinker such as Calvin understood what was at stake in the development of reformed dogma and catechesis, he aimed to pay close attention to scripture and patristic sources with an eye to their relevance for judiciously adjudicating questions of contemporary religious practice. By drawing on the very sources his opponents relied upon, he intended to gain a sympathetic hearing while at the same time subverting their position. And so, for example, it comes as no surprise that in his criticism of the medieval cult of relics he bolsters his opinion by citing Augustine’s comments on the psychology of idolatry:

> It is certain that the *idolomania* with which the minds of men are now fascinated, cannot be cured otherwise than by removing the material cause of the infatuation. We have too much experience of the absolute truth of Augustine’s sentiment (*Ep. 49*): “No man prays or worships looking on an image without being impressed with the idea that it is listening to him.” Similarly (*in Psalm cxv. 4*): “Images are more likely to mislead an unhappy soul having a mouth, eyes, ears and feet than to correct it, because neither speak, nor see, nor hear, nor walk.”

Similarly, in his controversy over the Lord’s Supper with the Gnesio-Lutheran, Tilemann Heshusius, Calvin consistently invokes the authority of Augustine, Chrysostom, Cyril, Epiphanius, Irenaeus, and other patristic authors. Citing Augustine’s doctrine of the

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89 John Calvin, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church: A Humble Exhortation to the most invincible Emperor Charles V, and the most illustrious Princes and other Orders, now holding a Diet of the Empire at Spires that they seriously undertake the task of restoring the Church presented in the name of all those who wish Christ to reign*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 190.
sacrament as a ‘visible word,’ he asks: “Are we not, outside Baptism, cleansed by the blood of Christ and regenerated by the Spirit? It is true that to help our infirmity a visible testimony is added, the better to confirm the thing signified; and not only so, but to bestow in greater truth and fullness what we receive by faith of the gospel even without any external action.” In other words, Calvin’s appeals to Augustine on so controversial a matter as the practice of the Lord’s Supper and the question of the veneration of images would have been double-edged, utilizing a theological grammar common to both Protestants and Catholics that at once defended the reformed position and undermined that of medieval Catholicism, but only undermining it in such a way that the reformed position could not be accused of doctrinal innovation.

These brief examples call attention to Calvin’s complicated relationship with vision itself. His conflicted approach to vision is undoubtedly a consequence of his theological inheritance, one that sometimes embraced vision as the primary sense through which divine instruction occurred and at other times rejected it as a foothold for idolatry. For, depending on the context or polemical point at hand, Calvin will emphasize one or other of these points. Hence, when addressing the weakness of human faith, he writes, “Unless the power of God, by which he can do all things, confronts our eyes (quia nisi virtus Dei, qua potest omnia, oculis nostris occurant), our ears will barely receive the Word or not esteem it at its true value.” But he will also say, as in his commentary on Moses’s encounter with Yahweh in Exodus 3, “A vision and a voice came to Moses, but the chief thing was the voice, because true knowledge of God is perceived more by the

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ears than by the eyes.” The stark contrast in these comments underscores, first, the variable nature of Calvin’s thinking about vision and, second, the fact that any treatment of vision within the context of theological discourse can be an exceptionally complicated and even confounding endeavor.

Finally, we should briefly note that these difficulties were not limited to early Protestants like Calvin. Alain Besançon underscores a similar ambivalence in the Council of Trent’s decree on visual representation from 1563:

Images were part of the episcopal duty of instruction. It is good to pray to a saint to obtain their intercession with God through his Son, the only Redeemer and Savior. It is good to venerate their holy bodies and their relics…. No one believed there was anything divine about them, any “virtue” in them, but rather “the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent….” Then came the discipline: no image was to convey false doctrine. There was to be no superstition: let it be specified to the simple folk that images do not represent the deity “as if one could perceive it with the eyes of the body or express it with colors and forms.”

In many ways, this is simply an elaborate explanation of Gregory the Great’s well-known dictum that “images are the books of the unlearned,” a claim that inadvertently fleeced images of the unique power they were supposed to possess by placing them in analogous relation to texts. It was certainly the case that for early modern Christians, the image could be dangerous, since it, like a text, could convey false doctrine, only on the sly because it did so less explicitly. As Stuart Clark writes of the 16th-century theological debates:

It was…the religious judgments on seeing that were the most critical, betraying Christianity’s virtually perennial unease over its relationship to

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92 Calvin, Comm. Ex. 3:19; emphasis mine.
the senses. Not surprisingly, they concentrated on the eyes as the gateway to vice and immorality. The obvious corollary of the analogy between spiritual sight and bodily sight was that the spirit and mind could be poisoned if the eyes were allowed to see profane or evil things.\footnote{Clark, \textit{Vanities of the Eye}, 23–24.}

Therefore, if visual representation was to be part of the devotion of ‘simple folk,’ they needed to be given blinders against vice and sin, reminded above all else that their eyes could not fully perceive God, because created things—color and form, for example—can never capture or convey the divine essence, which always remains invisible. Yet in spite of this anxiety over vision, consonant with the rise of the pulpit and press, there was the abiding conviction among early modern theologians that discourse on vision was indispensable to the practices of worship and thinking about God. They recognized that concern for the visual was somehow proper to task of theology. And as far as I am aware, no early Protestant theologian thought more deeply or struggled more mightily with this than Calvin.

1.5 Conclusion

As the foregoing analysis demonstrates, the subject of vision, when approached from the vantage points of philosophical and theological analysis, is fraught with conceptual difficulties. (Notably, I have left discussion of premodern optics and visual theory to the side, though consideration of these sources would shed more light on the problem of vision.)\footnote{See David Park, \textit{The Fire Within the Eye} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3–144.} Due to the tendency to grant vision primacy among the sense-faculties as well as its widespread use as a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge, theological treatments of vision have been wide-ranging and complex, extending to teaching about the vision of the soul in connection with the vision of the body, the nature of idolatry and
the possibility of idols polluting the soul through the eye, the practice of iconoclasm, and
the possibility, impossibility, and danger of ‘seeing God.’ In the process of addressing
these concerns, this chapter has presented three key ideas that will serve as the foundation
for the study of Calvin’s theology of vision in the material that follows. I now offer a
summary description of these fields, and draw out some broad conclusions that results
from the above analysis.

1. I started with the analysis of two key terms in recent scholarship within the
field of theological aesthetics, ‘visual theology’ and ‘theologies of vision.’ I have
suggested that, strictly speaking, the former concerns the role of images as sources of
theological reflection and insight—typified by the iconographic tradition—while the
latter concerns theological explanations of vision itself. In this dissertation, I am
interested in constructing a picture of Calvin’s theology of vision, and not a visual
theology. In other words, I am not necessarily interested in how Calvin thinks about the
possibility (or impossibility) of religious images mediating divine revelation, but in how
he understands the sense-faculty of vision functioning in the human experience of God.

Along these lines, I have highlighted the widespread use of the concept ‘visual
theology’ in recent writing on the theology’s relationship with vision, visual art, and
discourses in art history. However, in spite of its prevalence, there is no clear consensus
on what contemporary scholars mean when they utilize it as a framework for approaching
visual art or discourses about the nature of vision itself. I argued that the conceptual
ambiguities arise from confusion about the way ‘the visual’ is seen to relate to theology,
or ‘speech about God.’ That no explanation is given as to how ‘the visual’ qualifies and
thus properly relates to ‘theology’ as the two terms are joined to form an analytic pair
renders ‘visual theology’ incoherent as a mode of analysis. Therefore, in place of ‘visual theology,’ I proposed that we deploy the concept of ‘theology of vision’ as a means of describing any analysis of vision from a theological vantage point, as well as a framework for organizing the ways in which vision function within a given theological program. I have suggested that the category ‘theology of vision’ should be understood as having two distinct dimensions. On the one hand, it concerns the theological explanation of the phenomenon of vision itself. On the other, it accounts for the ways vision and the experience of seeing shape a theology, particularly in terms of how theological reflection arises from visual experience and encounters with God and the world. Moving forward, this is the sense in which I speak of a ‘theology of vision’ in Calvin’s thought.

2. In order to bridge this more general discussion of theologies of vision with a more focused account of the basis of theologies of vision, I turned to Aristotle’s *De Anima*. I argued that his account of the metaphysics of vision, particularly as he theorized the imagination as active in the recollection of visual sense-experiences inscribed upon the soul, survived as one of the most influential postulates on how external objects affect sentient subjects. Although my objective was not to establish direct influence on Calvin (though it may be that there was, in fact, direct influence), I offered a reading of *De Anima* in order to show that as a folk theory of optics and memory, traces of Aristotle’s account can be seen as persisting into the early modern period. Evidence for this is seen in the seriousness with which early moderns, especially early Protestants, took the possible influence of idols on worshippers—an idolatrous image could be taken into the soul with devastating effects.
To briefly rehearse our reading of De Anima, central to Aristotle’s account is the description of the consonance between bodily (material) and spiritual (immaterial) vision. This distinction brought into view questions regarding the nature of materiality, the degree to which it is contingent on an immaterial reality, and whether or not vision is a material or immaterial phenomenon (or some combination of both). Attention to these issues allowed us to consider a basic tension at the heart of the Aristotelian account vision—that is, whether or not vision is ultimately concerned with the receptive capacities of the bodily eye or the perceptive capacities of the immaterial soul. In a word, in addition to gesturing at the treatise’s widespread historical influence, the purpose of considering De Anima was to highlight some of the key difficulties with developing a coherent schematic of materiality’s relationship with immateriality, abridged in Aristotle’s doctrine of the vision of the body and vision of the soul. These are difficulties that we will see again as we delve more deeply into Calvin’s theology of vision.

Extending these themes, we examined Elizabeth Anscombe’s analysis of immaterial substance as a means of exposing ‘modern,’ or Cartesian, assumptions about the ontology of the ‘immaterial.’ Anscombe helped us see that Aristotle’s account of the relationship between bodily and spiritual vision relied on an understanding of the immaterial substantial soul as an entity distinct from but bound to the material substantial body. This influential theory persisted through centuries of theological reflection and, as Anscombe showed, despite various reconfigurations, was the dominant ontological view up through the 17th century. This meant that, to reinforce the point made above, early modern theologians like Calvin would have been heirs to some version of this theory. Moreover, as Anscombe contended, rather than issuing in a radical dualism between body
and soul, this classical philosophical framework allowed theorists to conceive of the body and soul as a complex, irreducible psycho-somatic whole. And with respect to the question of vision, this meant the vision of the bodily eye was intimately tied to the visual operations of the soul in re-collecting and re-membering those objects that had been taken in through it. To open the bodily eye and see, for the pre- and early modern theology, meant receiving something through the sense apparatus that was then inscribed upon the soul. According to Anscombe’s reading of this strand of historical philosophy, the ontological categories of the material and immaterial are thus mutually reinforcing realities, and getting a grip on this is crucial for understanding why the experience of seeing within the complex of religious devotion was taken so seriously in the late medieval and early modern periods.

3. Among the early Protestants, seeing as part of religious activity was dangerous. The sense of sight was a powerful tool for encountering God but also for entertaining idols unawares. Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, the notion that the soul could somehow be affected by the gaze of the bodily eye meant that idolatry presented both a metaphysical and moral problem. To venerate a material image was thought to be an exchange mediated through the apparatus of the eye, whereby worship was not only being directed at the object but the object was being taken into the body and thus somehow inscribed upon the soul. Therefore, the problem of the idol was more than a problem of misplaced worship. It presented a risk in the form of mingling the soul with infernal realities that seized glory from the true God. If the body was positioned before a religious image in a posture of worship or veneration, and the image was ‘touched’ by the bodily eye in an idolatrous way, then this bodily action was performed to the detriment of
the soul, and perhaps to the ultimate damnation of the worshipper. Thus the importance of discerning the role of vision, the place of religious images, and just what constituted idolatrous worship in restructured early Protestant worship.

Elaborating these points, I introduced Carlos Eire’s notion of Protestantism as a religion of transcendence following its rejection of the immanent religion of late medieval Catholicism. According to Eire, Protestantism’s newfound preoccupation with the transcendent energized all instances of image breaking among the reformers. Although I acknowledged the accuracy of the claim that Calvin went beyond his Protestant forebears in the effort to cleanse late medieval worship, I also criticized Eire’s conclusion that due to this Calvin was fully given over to a religion of transcendence that demeaned the material world and conceived of vision strictly in negative terms. In response, I suggested that Calvin’s anxiety over images and concern over the possibility of the idolatrous gaze is only a component piece of a larger theology of vision that conceives of bodily sight as the starting place for the true vision of God. As we shall see, for Calvin it is not the material world that needs to be left behind in one’s pursuit of a clear and true vision of the divine, for the material world of dirt, water, blood, and flesh is absolutely necessary in mediating the visual encounter between humanity and the transcendent God. Rather, the idolatrous gaze must be identified and reoriented if the revelation of God that is plainly offered in the things that are made is to be seen. In other words, Calvin’s concern over the idolatrous gaze is only one part of a more vast, more complex theology of vision that takes the experience of seeing to be one of the most profitable theological tools. To this positive, constructive account of vision, I now turn
Chapter Two

The Moribund Letter, the Vital Image:

Vision in Calvin’s Biblical Commentaries

God’s Word is the mirror—
In reading it or hearing it,
I am supposed to see myself in the mirror—
But look, this business of the mirror is so confusing
That I very likely never come to see myself reflected.

Søren Kierkegaard, For Self-Examination

2.1.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the theological role of vision in selections from Calvin’s biblical commentaries.¹ Given the sheer scope of Calvin’s writing on and about scripture, not only in the commentaries but elsewhere in his theological corpus, it should be stated up front that what follows does not exhaust the material that could be taken into account and folded into the broader argument. Nevertheless, the present analysis is intended to open a window on the variety of ways that Calvin thinks about and elucidates the theological role of vision in scripture, particularly in the Hebrew prophets and Pauline letters—texts that, as later readers of the reformer have roundly acknowledged, are often given pride of place across his theological writings, and thus serve as textual anchors for the greater part of his theological project.²

¹ Unless otherwise noted, throughout this chapter citations from Calvin’s biblical commentaries will be taken from the Calvin Translations Society, Calvin’s Commentaries, ed. and trans. John King, et al., 22 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1856; reproduced by Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1981). All citations from Calvin’s Commentaries will follow a simplified style, noting the author, biblical book from which the commentary is taken, chapter and verse range of the biblical text, and designated as taken from the ‘CTS’ series.

² For remarks on the crucial role of the Hebrew prophets in Calvin’s theology and pastoral ministry—particularly with respect to the notion of the ongoing public prophetic ministry of Christians in the post-apostolic church—as rooted in the example of the Minor Prophets, see G. Sujin Pak, “Luther and Calvin on the Nature and Function of Prophecy: The Case of the Minor Prophets,” in Calvin and Luther: The
The movement of this chapter will be from general, contextual matters to the particularities of Calvin’s exegesis of biblical passages where vision is of central thematic and theological importance. Consideration will be given to the role of the commentaries in relation to Calvin’s larger body of work, as well as to their relationship with currents that flowed from the reformer’s immediate intellectual context—what scholars of late medievalism and the early Renaissance broadly characterize as ‘early modern humanism,’ an expansive academic, social, and political movement that, among other things, helped nurture the burgeoning Protestant faith in which Calvin was embedded. Special attention will be given to one of early modern humanism’s most important scholarly preoccupations as it intersected with emerging Protestant thought—the recovery and revival of ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical strategies for articulating the ‘new’ theology grounded in the renewed sense of divine sovereignty over all things.


Here, we are interested in the influence of the retrieved rhetorical strategy on Calvin’s theological program, particularly as it bears on Calvin’s theological use of visual categories and concepts mediated by his understanding of divine accommodation—what we might paradoxically call ‘the grammar of God’ through that which is ‘seeable’ and ‘perceptible.’

Following this discussion of Calvin on rhetoric, we will consider aspects of his doctrine of scripture itself. It goes without saying that Calvin’s understanding of scripture has been hotly debated, with perennial disagreement over a number of tedious dogmatic issues, none of which will occupy us here. While we could take a variety of routes and tacks in order to explore this topic, two ideas will be of special interest that will together, along with the aforementioned discussion of Calvin on rhetoric, form additional backdrop for the present chapter. First, we will comment on Calvin’s use of the metaphor of the mirror to describe the ‘reflective’ and ‘imaging’ qualities of biblical texts. It is this metaphor (or analogy) that puts Calvin’s doctrine of scripture in contact with visual thinking. Second, and relatedly, we will take stock of the idea that scripture is one of the chief instruments through which humanity comes to ‘see’ God as God condescends to be known in the world.

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Once an account of these background details is in place, we will deal with the heart of the matter: Calvin’s perspective on the manifold ways that vision, visual analogies, visual error, and visual discipline are used in the biblical books to throw light on the nature of the Hebrew prophetic and early apostolic encounters with God. Encounters that, in turn, according to Calvin’s reading, set the terms for how the eyes of the faithful are trained to ‘see’ God in the post-apostolic age of anticipation. This material will be taken up when we deal with the ties Calvin discerns between the dual testimonies of the prophets and apostles—how they converse across the biblical witness about coming to see the revelation of God directly, initially as a ‘first sketch’ (adumbratio or umbra) then as a ‘living image’ (expressa effigies).

2.1.2 Comments on the Argument and Approach

To preview the arc of analysis and argument of this chapter, a few brief comments are in order. First, by situating Calvin’s biblical commentaries within the stream of the renewal of the study of classical rhetoric that grew out of Renaissance-era humanism, I call attention to the way in which Calvin’s understanding of accommodation is rooted in his theological use of ancient Greek and Latin sources. This is not exactly a novel or controversial point, for as many have noted, his interest in rhetoric was lifelong, beginning with his legal studies as a student in France that reached early academic expression in his commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia. Briefly, the doctrine of

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5 Analysis of Calvin’s understanding of the role of divine accommodation in the prophets and apostles was first taken up in the work of Reinhold Hedtke. See Reinhold Hedtke, Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1969), 106–14.
6 See T.H.L. Parker’s extended discussion of this distinction in Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 58–59.
7 See Ford Lewis Battles, trans., Calvin’s Commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia (Leiden: Brill, for the Renaissance Society of America, 1969). For notes on how the commentary sheds light on the reformer’s
accommodation in Calvin is a key theological concept with an ancient pedigree. As the reformer sees it, accommodation is the framework in which divine revelation must be understood. Accommodation is the conceptual category that describes the ‘downward’ movement of God in the conveyance of revelation to creatures according to their created capacities. Calvin—as one who often wondered at the benevolence and care that moved God to make Godself known in and to the finite—utilized the doctrine to help picture and clarify the nature of God’s self-revelation through sensuous instruments like scripture, the sacraments, and the material world broadly construed. It is through these material things that God makes Godself available to finite creatures, which serve to ‘lift’ the created gaze so that God may be truly ‘seen.’ This theme of ascending the created gaze beginning with created things is expressed with clarity in Calvin’s use of the image of the mirror in his treatment of scripture and creation.

In the biblical commentaries, Calvin’s analysis of the visual manifestations of divinity coalesce with his understanding of the divine benevolence, kindness (*humanitas Dei*), and solicitousness, qualities evinced in the many ways God comes to meet humanity in spite of its inherent limitation. As we shall explore in more detail below, Calvin contends that the ‘descent’ of God is for the purpose of ‘ascending’ the created gaze. The lynchpin is the Spirit, the one who enlivens and animates that which is otherwise ‘dead’ and barren. Without the animating work of the Spirit, for example, to show forth the wisdom of God, the letter of scripture is desolate. Discussion of this constellation of ideas is important for getting a grip on the positive place of materiality and the created world in Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God (and theology of

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mediation). To be sure, the doctrine of accommodation is an indispensible concept in his understanding of the place of vision in his sacramental theology, as well as the place of vision in his theological epistemology—topics that will be taken up in the following chapters.

Second, once we have fixed this background material, the central theological theme I develop in this reading can be summarized as follows. According to Calvin, in God’s self-revelation through the prophetic visions and oracles, a form of visual accommodation was being given that was not intended as an end in itself, but was meant to prepare—as a tutor prepares her pupil—the people of Israel for the sum vision of God in the revelation of the Messiah, ultimately to be made manifest before all peoples of the earth. Calvin’s positive portrayal of ‘prophetic vision’ in the Hebrew witness is contingent upon an understanding of the ‘superior’ revelation of God in Jesus Christ, God’s Messiah. It should be noted that by referring to the revelation of God in Christ as ‘superior,’ Calvin does not intend to make a qualitative claim as much as one about this revelation’s potency—God is more fully ‘shown’ in the unveiling of God’s Christ, with the apostolic writings witnessing, in ways particular and appropriate to their historical

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8 For discussions of Calvin’s theology of mediation as it relates to visual contact with God, see section 4.4 below.
9 “That the Lord did not offer the Jews an earthly happiness or wealth as a goal to which they should aspire, but He adopted them into hope of immortality and revealed and testified this adoption to them by visions as well as by His law and prophets.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 386.
10 The reading I offer is summarized succinctly in Calvin’s own words: “[The promises made to Israel], declared and testified to by these holy men [i.e., the prophets] who were filled with the Spirit of God, have been the comfort and consolation of the children and elect of God, who have nourished, supported, and sustained their hope in these promises, waiting upon the will of the Lord to show forth what he had promised. Many kings and prophets among them have desired greatly to see its accomplishment, never ceasing all the while to understand, in their hearts and spirits by faith, the things they could not see with their eyes. And, God has confirmed his people in every possible way during their long waiting for the great Messiah, by providing them with his written law, containing numerous ceremonies, purifications, and sacrifices, which were but the figures and shadows of the great blessing to come with Christ, who alone was the embodiment and truth of them.” Calvin, Preface to Olivétan's New Testament, in Calvin: Commentaries, ed. Joseph Haroutunian and Louise Pettibone Smith (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 62–63.
location, to this showing. The ‘shadowy’ (umbratilis) character of the Old Testament witness is, for Calvin, not an impediment to God’s revelation in Christ—as if, in some kind of Marcionite convulsion, the older revelation is something to be shattered, overcome, or discarded upon God’s self-manifestation in the new—but absolutely necessary, and thus indispensable, for framing the posture of Israel’s anticipation of the Messiah’s nativity (a posture, we might add, that still defines the present state of the gathered community of faith in the age after the apostles). Hebrew prophetic vision finds itself, precisely as prophetic, anticipatory, prospective vision, appropriate to its time and place, called as an ante-witness to the future unveiling of the vision of God in Jesus Christ. These two ‘forms’ (or ‘administrations’ as Calvin sometimes calls them) of revelation are distinct according to their epochal distribution, but remain permanently connected, and thus continuous, as the former depends upon the latter as the means by which its own content and purpose is clarified: Christ, as true image and word of God, reveals the goal towards which the ancient prophetic visions were striving, which is that of the culmination of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob given in flesh and blood. The vision of God that arises from this revelatory event of the advent of God’s Messiah is at once a mediated and unmediated one. For Calvin, God discloses Godself

11 “The covenant made with the patriarchs was so much like ours, in its substance and truth, that it can be said to be the same as ours; it only differs in the order of dispensation.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 386.

12 T.H.L. Parker points to Calvin’s recovery of the ancient notion of anagogē, or the transference of meaning from a historical person or event to some theological truth, as one of the methodological means by which Calvin preserves the ‘literal’ or ‘historical’ sense of the text alongside the theological. “Anagogē is not merely a comparison that happens to arise in the expositor’s mind, but an application that is demanded by the letter of the text.” Therefore, by using the anagogical method of interpretation in his reading of the Old Testament, “Calvin is being faithful to his view of the relationship between the two Testaments: the substance of the Testaments is one and the same; only they differ in form. Were the substances not one and the same, it would be impossible to make the transference by anagogē; we could only compare and contrast.” T.H.L. Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 72–73.
with clarity in the flesh of Jesus Christ,\textsuperscript{13} this flesh being the means by which humanity comes to see God with “unveiled face,” which is to say “near and up close.”

With this outline of the argument in place, let us examine in more detail how Calvin thinks about God’s drawing near to the world through the medium of scripture as it grew out of the prophetic traditions and was augmented by the witness of the apostles. We will consider Calvin’s use of one of his favorite metaphors—that of the mirror—as a means of describing biblical revelation’s role in reflecting the nature and character of God in the world. These comments on Calvin’s use of the image of the mirror will serve to open up a more expansive discussion of the doctrine of divine accommodation in Calvin. His somewhat unique perspective on the doctrine will be taken up in further detail when we consider his descriptions of divine rhetoric and eloquence, verbal categories, which fortify his understanding of the persuasiveness of the prophetic and apostolic witnesses.

2.1.3 Scripture as Mirror

Though Calvin repeatedly returns to the idea that the divine has drawn close to humanity in God’s Christ, he also stresses that God has provided certain material ‘helps’ and ‘aids’

\textsuperscript{13} For comments on Calvin’s relationship with Jewish learning and exegesis, see Stephen G. Burnnett, “Calvin’s Jewish Interlocutor: Christian Hebraism and Anti-Jewish Polemics during the Reformation,” \textit{Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance} 55, no. 1 (1993): 113–123; and Hans Joachim Kraus, “Israel in the Theology of Calvin: Towards a New Approach to the Old Testament and Judaism,” \textit{Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations} 22 (1989): 75–86. While it is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate on what many have seen as Calvin’s antagonism and demeaning of Judaism according to his comments on the religion as responsible for obscuring the clarity of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ, it is worth bearing in mind that figures sympathetic to ‘Hebraist’ commentary, like Bucer and Calvin, did not simply embrace Jewish learning uncritically. For a close look at Calvin’s complex, if not fraught, relationship with Judaism and Jewish biblical interpretation, see G. Sujin Pak, “The Protestant Reformers and the Jews: Excavating Contexts, Unearthing Logic,” \textit{Religions} 8, no. 4, art. 72 (2017): 1–13.
to clarify this self-manifestation.\footnote{My comments here rely, in part, on Eric Kayayan, “The Mirror Metaphor in Calvin’s Institutes: A Central Epistemological Notion?,” \textit{In die Skriflig} 30, no. 4 (1996): 419–441.} Chief among these helps is biblical revelation in its diversity of parts. While Calvin utilizes numerous metaphors and images for articulating his doctrine of scripture, the visual analogy of the mirror is one of the most striking (and frequently employed).\footnote{For additional comments on the use of the image of the mirror in Calvin’s sacramental theology, see section 3.2 below.} For scripture serves to reflect and ‘image’ the divine will and nature in exceptional detail, even as it serves as a ‘lens’ through which both God and world can be viewed. Cornelis van der Kooi writes of Calvin’s general use of the image of the mirror:

In Calvin’s theology the metaphor of the mirror stands for a multiplicity of concrete ways through which knowledge of God can arise and be nourished. It is an outspoken metaphor which functions positively theologically as an indicator of the range of earthly means with which God, through his Spirit, draws men to himself. Mirrors are the places where God makes clear what He wills regarding man.\footnote{Cornelis van der Kooi, \textit{As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych} (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 16.}

Indeed, as Calvin says of the Mosaic witness, it is “like a mirror in which we first contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both, just as we see in a mirror the spots on our face.”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1559 Latin}, 1.7.7.} Deploying the same set of images, but casting the books of Moses in a more positive, profitable light, the reformer also admonishes:

Let us remember that God, who is invisible and whose wisdom, power and righteousness are incomprehensible, has set before our eyes Moses’ history as a mirror in which he wants his likeness to glow for us. For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1559 Latin}, 1.14.1.}
While scripture is but one among many ‘mirrors’ spread throughout creation through which divine self-revelation is made manifest, it is, for Calvin, one of the most powerful (and even comprehensive), for in it is contained the Law, the covenants, the poetry of lament and joy, the prophetic oracles, and the apostolic attestation to the gospel—each of these textual pieces, in their diversity, come together to form the reflective glass in which the invisible ‘face’ of divinity can be seen. Accordingly, the biblical witness forms the outer boundary of divine revelation, the limits of which, Calvin cautions, humanity should not transgress. The biblical witness, in other words, while revealing something true about the divine nature, also serves to corral excessive speculation. And at the same time, this witness is the starting point for speech about God, and in this way it is the context in which the freedom of theological exploration is to occur. In other words, by contemplating God in the mirror of the biblical witness, excessive and undue philosophical conjecture is bridled (or at least held in check), even as one is made free to wonder at and comment on the living divine image manifest therein.

Calvin adds to this set of images the idea that Scripture displays the eloquence (eloquentia) of God through a variety of word-pictures through which God accommodates to humanity’s perceptive capacities. These divine acts of accommodation serve as the foundation for proclamation—prophetic, apostolic, and post-apostolic profession—in and through which God is made manifest in the midst of the congregations, and, indeed, rightly proclaimed before all peoples. Paraphrasing Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 1:17, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the

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gospel, and not with eloquence wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power,” Calvin writes: “As for myself, I do not simply confess that my preaching has been conducted in a rude, coarse, and unpolished style, but I even glory in it. For it was right that that it should be so, and this was the method that was divinely prescribed to me.”21 In other words, the so-called eloquent speech that arises from the encounter with the mirror of biblical revelation is transmuted in the humble witness of those tasked with laying bare the “oracles of God” (oracular Dei) and teaching handed down from heaven (caelestis doctrina).22 And this comes according to the enlivening activity of the Spirit, who works “to illumine the blind” and “strengthen the feeble” by the light of Christ’s gospel.23

To sum up these introductory comments: Calvin’s visual thinking about scripture comes into view at the most general level through his use of the metaphor of the mirror. This image is utilized to express the various ways in which scripture serves to ‘reflect’ the divine will and character, and thus clarify the nature of the divine works spread throughout creation, as well as to ‘image’ and throw light on humanity’s corrupted state before God. In scripture, Calvin thinks, we come to ‘see’ invisible divinity and those parts of ourselves that are hidden from view on account of our depravity, blindness, and inherent limitations. The visual categories that Calvin utilizes in this complex intersect with his interest in the verbal and rhetorical as he conceives of the mirror of scripture serving as the ground of theological speech. As we have already indicated, and as we shall explore in further detail below, this notion of biblical revelation as mirror-like

21 Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 1:17 from CTS.
22 Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.6.2–1.6.3. See also, Kooi, As in a Mirror, 55.
coalesces with Calvin’s fascination with ancient rhetorical schemes, in that he treats God’s accommodating activity through scripture as one of the chief means by which the ‘divine eloquence’ is mediated. Put differently, scripture as mirror is connected to these concepts in that biblical revelation is a form of accommodation by which the ‘divine rhetoric’ is made manifest in the world.

In the interest of laying groundwork for further investigation of these topics, let us offer a few brief comments on the place of Calvin’s biblical commentaries within the broader scope of his theology. This will allow us to gain a deeper sense of their theological and practical function in relation to such works as the *Institutes*, theological tracts and treatises, and sermons. Following these comments, we will layout a framework for ‘reading for the visual’ in Calvin’s biblical exegesis. Along these lines, consideration will be given to the commentaries’ ties to the humanism of the reformer’s early modern and Renaissance context. This will open up discussion of the role of rhetoric in shaping Calvin’s doctrine of divine accommodation, particularly as it intersects with his thinking about the visual—itself a profound measure of accommodation to human perceptual capacities according to Calvin—in scripture.

2.2.1 *Calvin’s Biblical Commentaries in Relation to the Whole*

Calvin’s commentaries on scripture are the laboratory of his theological corpus. Upon entry, even the most casual reader soon gets the impression that the ideas that emerge are the result of focused reflection combined with feverish toil. In his lectures on scripture, Calvin takes up what he considers to be the most revered matter of sacred teaching—what he will describe as the words of the prophets and apostles made living by the Holy
Spirit—and places it in under the knife of exposition, laying ancient words open with the hope that God might be seen and heard in the contemporary moment. In the commentaries, as Bruce Gordon put it, Calvin attempted to follow “the grain of the biblical text” in a sort of rough-sawn fashion, and the work that emerged would then be planed and dressed between the years of 1536 and 1559 on the worktable of the Institutes, an immensely influential piece of theological writing that reflected the reformer’s lifelong commitment to nurturing Christian piety among the faithful gleaned from the “sacred reading.” However, this was not mere excavation for Calvin, but a laborious process of constructively setting forth doctrine in order that Christ, the telos of scripture, could be more clearly seen.

When it comes to the actual task of biblical commentary, Calvin deployed a more meandering, searching approach than in other works. This led to a clear and focused but at times unsystematic presentation of certain doctrinal and interpretive lines that would be pursued and clarified elsewhere. When held up against his sermons and theological treatises, for example, the tone of the commentaries tends to be less assertive and a bit more speculative, though Calvin is more than willing to castigate divergent

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26 In his classic work on Calvin’s theology from 1938, Wilhelm Niesel helpfully describes Calvin’s engagement with the Bible as the first step in the development of what the reformer would call the philosophia christiana. Of this, Niesel writes: “Calvin, in writing his theology, is concerned about something far deeper than an exposition of Scriptural truths apprehended by faith. The ‘end’ of the Bible at which his work is aimed is…truth itself: Jesus Christ. But Calvin is not the controller of that truth…. Calvin’s design is thus purely and simply to expound doctrine, the affirmations of faith, ‘philosophia christiana’. But this exposition of Christian doctrine is not the same thing as the ‘end’ of his theological task. This ultimate purpose lies beyond the immediate one; it is the same as that of the Bible itself; our Lord Jesus Christ. Calvin in his theology is concerned fundamentally about this living Lord; not about certain doctrines which he has extracted from Scripture.” Wilhelm Niesel, The Theology of Calvin, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 28.
interpretations he finds wanting in the established exegesis. More importantly, the commentaries were generative in that the streams of thought developed in them eventually gave rise to a range of other theological works. Chief among these, as has already been mentioned, was the Institutes. All translations of the work following the 1539 edition were intended as a manual for pastors and conceived as a structured summary of the doctrine Calvin believed he had uncovered from scripture. Given the unique way that practical matters were placed in conversation with constructive theological insight, the Institutes would ultimately become one of the most enduring works of early Protestantism. However, in the years following, among those who would come to self-identify with Calvin’s theology, its indebtedness to the biblical commentaries became obscured or disregarded altogether. Recovering a sense of the theological and literary relationship between the biblical commentaries, Institutes, and other pieces of Calvin’s theological output has been a topic of fervent research in the latter half of last century that has continued in recent years. In addition to shedding light on Calvin’s own exegetical practices, and the ways in which the biblical commentaries relate to the development of his theology and theological correspondence, this scholarship has produced a more textured picture of the reformer’s reliance on late medieval and Reformation-era currents in biblical interpretation—the struggle over

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27 For comments on Calvin’s biblical interpretation and his approach to the sermon, see T.H.L. Parker, Calvin’s Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 22–32.
interpreting biblical authority, of course, being one of the definitive marks of early Protestant identity.\(^29\)

The Bible in 16\(^{th}\)-century Europe was a text in conflict. This period witnessed a torrent of historical-philological research powered by a community of scholars represented by figures such as Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), Rodolphus Agricola (d. 1485), and others. Their advances in the recovery and dissemination of ancient texts were crystalized by the great humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536), master of the *bonae litterae*, whose scholarly and literary efforts gave rise to such groundbreaking and politically subversive works as Martin Luther’s *Biblia, Das ist: Die gantze heilige Schrifft Deudesch Auffs new zugericht*, published by the bookbinder Hans Lufft in 1534, and Olivetanus’s French translation of the Bible, for which Calvin prepared the preface, published in 1535 in Serrières, Neuchâtel, Switzerland.\(^30\) As T.H.L. Parker writes of the state of biblical translation and exegesis at the time of Calvin and the early reformation:

The history of Biblical study from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries shows a recurring conflict, not so much over the relationship in general as over its more precise working out and especially over the use of the Old Testament. The conflict was far from being what the nineteenth century


might have called “a mere wrangling of scholastic pedants.” We are talking about two books which were believed to possess supreme authority over men as the direct expression of the will of God. What these books taught was the absolute truth; what they promised beyond all that could be desired or deserved…. Acceptance or depreciating of the Old Testament manifested itself not only in personal ‘spirituality’ or moral behavior, but in terrifying or trivial social, cultural, legal, political, and ecclesiastical consequences, with the admission of the Mosaic judicial system into the law of the land (therefore burning witches—Exodus 22.18) or, at the other extreme, the denial of the physical world by medieval Manichees.  

The texts of the Old and New Testaments had long been understood as standing in a unitive, though conflicted, relationship, even if the terms of this friction were not always clearly spelled out. It was the question of the theological, and to some degree ceremonial and liturgical, ties between and implications of these texts that persisted as a point of intense debate in Calvin’s time. Evidence of Calvin’s involvement in these debates is vast, spread throughout his corpus and personal correspondence. As Parker suggests, the arguments and subsequent variety of social and religious practices that grew out of disagreements over the bearing of the Old Testament on the Christian life were significant. The diversity of opinions on the use of the Decalogue, the Writings, and the Prophets by 16th-century religious authorities were exacerbated and inflamed by the early intra-Lutheran debates over the proper relationship between Law and Gospel—which eventually gave rise to the new religious species of Anabaptism that came to horrify established Protestant authorities in German and Swiss lands due to the movement’s perceived antinomian and iconoclastic impulses. This suppuration coupled with the Council of Trent’s failure to construct a clear statement on biblical and ecclesiastical

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31 Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 43.
authority around which both Roman Catholics and Protestants could gather led to a
distancing and calcifying of the Protestant factions.33

Given the centrality of this conflict in defining some of the most basic theological
and ecclesial differences between nascent Protestantism and materializing Tridentine
Catholicism, Calvin’s lectures on scripture and their subsequent publication as the
biblical commentaries over the course of the 1540s and 1550s were as much political acts
as they were rhetorical or scholarly exercises aimed at nurturing the burgeoning
Protestant movement. The words of Valerian Poullain, writing from Strasbourg as a
French exile in 1545, expressed both these sentiments:

I want Calvin to determine once for all just this—that he will never rest
until he has written commentaries on all the Epistles of Paul, then on the
prophets, then on the sacred books. Gracious God! How they would help the
Church! How much they would do for the glory of Christ! What inextinguishable immortality they would win! But yet we are hindered by apologiae and I know not what else. We certainly write and are not idle; but things of this kind can be sought in the commentaries, and in fact already exist in that divine and incomparable Institutio.34

And so in the biblical commentaries, Calvin was not simply indulging the compulsions of
a skillful pedant, but was understood by his colleagues and adherents to be enacting some
of the most fundamental commitments of incipient Protestantism. Chief among these
convictions was the idea that doctrine and proclamation were to be placed in service of
the interpretation of scripture as it applied to all aspects of life in the world; or, put

33 As Lee Palmer Wandel writes, against the Protestant position that emphasized that the church existed under the authority of the word of God, “the Council of Trent set the other end of the spectrum on the question of the relationship between the Bible and the ordering of the world. The Council claimed for itself the authority to determine which books constituted the Bible and which books would be excluded: the Catholic Bible and the Protestant Bible would henceforth be different. The world was not to be ordered according to any one understanding of the Bible, and the Bible’s relationship to the world was to be mediated through a hierarchy of sacerdotal authority. For those who hoped for unity, the Council was a failure.” Wandel, The Reformation: Towards a New History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111. See also Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. II, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1990), 664.

differently, that Christian moral discipline did not arise from a set of ethical or social principles set forth from without, in some abstract universal, but from the community’s deliberate encounter with scripture as the community attempted to discern, through continual prayer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what obedience to God’s word (and law) was to look like in the place where it found itself. Indeed, to these notions such prominent leaders as Luther and Melanchthon, in their own distinct ways, had given voice in the years following their break with Rome. And this political-theological sentiment, Calvin believed, was in keeping with the most basic affirmations of apostolic, patristic, and catholic Christianity. It was this sense of the recovery of ancient theology coupled with an emphasis on the immediacy of God’s contemporary work in the community of faith that the early reformers thought validated their ecclesiastical movement. To this end, Calvin, for the most part, followed a lively form of exposition, something between the lectio continua of preaching and what we would now identify as the traditional academic lecture.

On the topic of the reformer’s actual method and practice of biblical interpretation, in their original form, most, if not all, of his lectures on scripture contained extemporaneous elements. He worked hastily at the mercy of a demanding schedule, and so the material was often cobbled together at the last minute then supplemented and smoothed out, sometimes with substantial revision (and sometimes not), at a later time for print. As Jean-François Gilmont describes:

The Reformer almost always wrote in a hurry. He waited until the last minute before writing short pamphlets, for instance until the looming deadline of the Frankfurt fair. He waited until his treatises were almost completely printed before writing the dedicatory epistle. He waited until he knew a messenger was available before writing a letter. He waited until

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it was nearly time for his exegetical lecture before preparing for it. In short, he seemed to be an overworked person who managed his schedule by only responding to the most pressing requests.³⁶

Calvin was occupied by a number of commitments, his exegetical lectures and theological correspondence being just a couple among many worries. To be sure, when inquiries were solicited for the publication of auditors’ notes on the exegetical lectures, Calvin was often hesitant due to the underdeveloped nature of the material coupled with his hurried approach. Concern over this eventually led, in most cases, to his direct involvement in the revision and editing of the commentaries for public dissemination. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that what is found in the commentaries is an accurate presentation of the basic doctrine and theology Calvin intended for his 16th-century Protestant audience, as it originated from his pen and place at the lectern, and ultimately as it came under his scrutiny prior to publication and dissemination.³⁷ The quilt-like structure of the commentaries presents a unique opportunity for a reader to discern distinct seams and fissures between various ideas that may be leveled off and concealed in other works. As we sample the commentaries for theological reflection on the visual and ocular in scripture, then, we will see that the visual plays a wide variety of roles, this diversity being more transparent in the commentaries than in other areas of the theological corpus.

2.2.2 Reading for the Visual in the Biblical Commentaries

Upon entering into a study of the commentaries, it ought to be kept in mind that we are getting to see Calvin work out ideas ‘on the wing,’ as it were. As noted above, one can

³⁷ See Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 26–29.
move forward recognizing that the commentary material is self-consciously raw, direct, and exploratory, the immediacy of which is rivaled only by the collected sermons, which represent biblical commentary and exposition in a different register. At risk of overstating the matter, when it comes to examining these works with a particular concept (or constellation of concepts) in view, the basic difficulty we are faced with is that of bringing clarity and order to a vast network of ideas that are dispersed across a collection of works that are, in large part, anything but orderly. This has as much to do with the expansiveness of the biblical material in question as it does the complexity of the overlapping interpretive techniques—historical, philological, and theological—Calvin utilized in treating it. In order to analyze Calvin’s theological use of visual categories in his exegesis of scripture, let us set out a simple strategy that is at once broad enough to account for and elevate the coherence of Calvin’s arguments across a range of texts without compromising the integrity and complexity of the form in which those arguments were originally given. What we have to say here is meant to be an extension on our remarks on the argument and approach outlined above.

As previously touched on, we will allow two key blocks from the commentaries to serve a synecdochic function for this segment of the study. These blocks will serve to represent Calvin’s broader perspective on the theological significance of vision in Scripture. They will be taken from the Twelve Minor Prophets (with brief consideration of the opening chapters of Ezekiel) and pericopes from the Letters of Paul (with a brief excursus on two key, interconnected passages from the Gospel of Luke). As we shall see, two features of Calvin’s theology of vision will come into view from analysis of his reflections on these writings. First, we will find that, for Calvin, the visual self-revelation
of God can be distinguished in terms of two distinct covenantal iterations (broadly characterized, generically, as ‘the old’ and ‘the new’), which leads to the second point, that for Calvin the vision of God, at least with respect to the sojourning, pre-eschatological circumstances in which the faithful find themselves, is always a mediated reality, administered through the conduits of prophet and apostle (the nature and content of this revelation being conditioned by the covenantal circumstances in which the revelation was given).

The contours of this theology of vision in the biblical commentaries begin to emerge as we trace out Calvin’s perspective on the movement from seeing the revelation of God (epitomized by the often obscure prophetic encounters with the Lord from the Old Testament witness) to beholding divine revelation in the New (summarized in the Pauline formula as beholding the divine glory in the face of Jesus Christ). In other words, what we will find in the following analysis is this: as Calvin’s account of the visual manifestation of God is unfolded, he treats the prophetic gaze and derivative testament as a true but ephemeral (visual) encounter with God, and when transmitted to the people of Israel, this vision is diminished, often requiring some accompanying material sign. The concrete, accompanying attestation, which Calvin is keen to highlight, suggests that prophetic vision anticipates a more profound, even definitive, vision of God. The vision to come, in the apostolic sense, is a dynamic one, involving the full exercise of faith in and through which all things are understood in relation to God, and thereby ‘truly known.’ Therefore, what we will see in the commentaries is that for Calvin ‘seeing’ in

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38 This means that, for better or worse, we are acknowledging the agency of the author, Calvin, as we attempt to hear his voice, which sits firmly in the 16th century, converse with the ancient biblical texts in question.

39 On Calvin’s theological epistemology, see the final chapter, especially sections 4.3.2 and 4.4.
the prophetic sense and ‘ beholding ’ in the apostolic sense are related in that both are modes of understanding flowing from the visual experience of the subject in question—encountering God as in a mirror or near and up close. Nevertheless, to return to a point that has already been touched on, it remains the case that prophetic seeing is a diminished form of understanding in relation to apostolic beholding. In short, we shall see that for Calvin, even though the prophet encounters the revelation of the Lord in an intense, concentrated form, this encounter does not ensure proper ‘ understanding, ’ or what we might call ‘ full comprehension, ’ which is to say that the prophet may see but not understand, while the apostle sees with greater understanding, not because of a superior intellect or native insight, but because of a definitive act of divine self-disclosure. Thus prophetic vision anticipates the full unveiling of God, whereby divinity is truly beheld, which is realized in the apostolic witnesses’ attestation to the enfleshed Jesus Christ.

To sum up: in many ways, the biblical commentaries form the generative nucleus of Calvin’s theology, also providing a foundation for other works. With respect to our current inquiry—the question of the significance of vision in the reformer’s theology—because the commentaries are unembellished and more searching in their approach than elsewhere in his theological corpus, they present visual concepts and metaphors in a more straightforward and unembellished manner. Precisely because of the more fluid and discursive style that is employed, the contrasts between the prophetic and apostolic accounts of seeing God are more easily discernable.

Now that we have rounded out this second set of introductory comments, let us turn to examine Calvin’s understanding of the conformity of divine revelation to creaturely perception, or his doctrine of accommodation. In order to highlight the
relevance of this doctrine to the broader study of the theological place of vision in the biblical commentaries, we will begin by looking at the theological relationship between vision (visio) and word (verbum). This is a natural starting point, because it is through vision and word that, for Calvin, God’s condescension and accommodating activity is made most poignantly manifest. Here, we are particularly interested in the rootedness of Calvin’s understanding of accommodation in the textual and verbal exercise of rhetoric.

As we transition into this material, we note that his doctrine of accommodation’s relation to the visual and verbal is closely connected with his understanding of mirror-like quality of biblical revelation as discussed above.

2.3.1 *The Visual, the Verbal, and the Doctrine of Accommodation*

Given its distinct association with aural and textual communication, and thus contrastive relationship with the visual, so far the designation ‘the word’ (logos/verbum) has largely been avoided as a means of describing Calvin’s theology of vision. This will remain the case, to be sure, as we pursue a reading of the reformer’s theological treatises on the sacraments and writings on the doctrine of the knowledge of God in the *Institutes*.

However, in what immediately follows we must be aware that verbum intersects with visio due to the former’s function in concepts like ‘prophetic speech’ (oraculum) and the New Testament theme of Christ as ‘word of God’ (logos Theou, or Dei verbum), crucial motifs that persist in the biblical material in question. And so, for example, when Calvin considers the Lord’s revelations to the Hebrew prophets, there is the keen sense that the revelation manifest through oracles and various other showings includes the

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40 For comments on ‘oracle’ in Calvin’s reading of Ezekiel, see de Boer, “‘Visio’ as Prophetic Performance,” in *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel*, 148–64.
setting forth of images, visual displays, woe oracles, and terror-visions, but also occurs “directly and up close” through uttered “external word” (externum verbi), as Calvin calls it at times.\textsuperscript{41} As we shall see, in his commentary, Calvin is sensitive to the fact that the visions associated with God’s self-revelation are often congruous with some spoken ‘word,’ typically taking the form of an imperative—“blow the trumpet,” “call a solemn assembly,” “be utterly amazed,” “see what the Lord God is doing in your midst,” and so on. Because of this, even though our primary topic of study is Calvin’s account of the visual in these texts, comment on the verbal must be given, even if only in an incidental way.

While the visual and the verbal are not identical, throughout scripture they often come into view alongside one another.\textsuperscript{42} As Calvin observes in the opening preamble to the Book of Amos, the prophet “boasts not here, in speaking of his own words, that he adduced anything as from himself, but avows himself to be only the minister of God; for he immediately adds, that he received [the words of God] by a vision...that the prophecies which follow were the words of Amos, and that they were words revealed to him from above; for the word chese, which Amos uses, properly means, to see by revelation.”\textsuperscript{43} The strangeness of the construction, “to see by revelation,” serves to highlight the peculiar nature of the prophetic books as theological documents. Indeed, when one of Calvin’s modern interpreters steps back to reflect on the reformer’s understanding of proclamation, the seen and the spoken are brought together in dynamic fashion. T.H.L. Parker writes, for example, that for Calvin when one sits in the school of

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\textsuperscript{41} See, e.g., his comments on Jl 2:12 in Calvin, \textit{Comm. Joel} 2:12 from CTS.

\textsuperscript{42} For comments on the theological relationship between the visual and verbal, see sections 1.2.1–1.2.2 above.

\textsuperscript{43} Calvin, \textit{Comm. Amos}, 1:1 from CTS; emphasis mine.
God for instruction, “the word” is handed down not as “secular knowledge” (savoir prophane), for it is not a matter of “dreams and reverie” (songes et resveries). Rather, the one who proclaims the word presides in God’s midst as if divinity was showing itself “visibly, or face to face”—and in this act of publicly broadcasting “the word,” God’s people are joined to one another as well as to their common head.44

Thus what we find in Calvin’s discussion of the prophetic oracles is a rigorous interrogation and exposition of the prophets’ encounter with the God of Israel on the edge of coherent, orderly experience, which is to say on the outer boundary of speaking and seeing. As the prophet find himself transfixed before Lord God in a moment that bears faint resemblance to common experience, he comes to see that he is caught in a moment of divine self-disclosure.45 One thinks of Ezekiel’s mystifying eye-studded wheels within the larger wheel in the sky or Joel’s terrifying apocalyptic vision of the Lord’s destruction of the nations as part of the vindication of Judah, texts that Calvin thinks required silence on the part of the original audience due to the new and fearful vision of the divine character that was being set forth.46 Though such reverence and awe may be demanded at times, Calvin is keen to unravel the communicative mode in which the respective prophet is operating—somewhere between speech and sight—which is, as we shall see, ultimately reimagined and clarified in Christ as true image and true speech of God (and thus true prophet).47 Because speech and sight are overlaid in the books of the prophets and, in a different way, in the Johannine and Pauline meditations on Christ in the New

45 Calvin’s analysis of the prophets is not exclusively focused on the eccentric or shocking elements of their witness. Rather, he understands them to be, first of all, diverse in their messages and theology and, secondly, those singularly tasked with beseeching the people of Israel and their monarchy to remember the covenantal gift given to the forefathers.
46 See, e.g., Calvin, Comm. Amos 5:8 from CTS.
Testament, dealing with the visual’s nebulous relation to ‘the word’ is unavoidable when one sets about analyzing Calvin’s own exegesis. As he says in one place, perhaps acknowledging the paradox of the sensuous, and recalling his comment on the preamble to Amos: “We must now observe…the words which [the prophet] saw concerning Israel.” It will be our task, then, to flesh out Calvin’s perspective on the theological texture that comes to light when the hidden, the unseen, the manifest, the seen, the spoken, and the heard are juxtaposed with one another in the books of the prophets and apostolic letters.

Furthermore, attention to Calvin’s perspective on the concept of ‘the word’ in scripture is also necessary for the obvious reason that early Christian authors consistently refer to Christ as both the eikon and logos of God. When the early Christian authors spoke of Christ as image and word, they were reaching back to Jewish and pagan resources, a fact with which Calvin himself was well familiar. In addition to the diverse influences flowing from Hellenistic thought, the appropriation of which by early

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48 Calvin, Comm. Amos 1:2 from CTS; emphasis mine.
49 For passages on Christ as eikon, see, e.g., Jn 1:18, Col 1:15, and 2 Cor 4:4. And for passages on Christ as logos, see Rv 19:13 and the well-known Prologue to the Gospel of John (Jn 1). For helpful comments on the later development of the concept of Christ as divine image, see Thomas G. Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the Imago Dei: The Importance of Being Human,” Logos 6, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 15–34. In particular, Weinandy gives some consideration to the provocative idea that Christ in the New Testament witness is presented, in line with an older tradition of Hebrew iconoclasm, as the pure, living icon of God.
50 My remarks here on the differences between Jewish and pagan resources are general and imprecise. I simply intend to point out some of the basic sources from which New Testament authors drew in their articulation of Christ’s identity.
51 For Calvin’s positive comments on the place of classical psychology on theorizing the structure of the soul and its implications for considering the soul as the seat of the image of God, see Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.15.6. Susan Schreiner points to his earliest work, Commentary on Seneca’s “De clementia,” 1.10 as another clear instance of Calvin’s positive appropriation of this classical psychology. see Susan E. Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1991), 64n59. When he turns to consider the biblical material concerning humanity as image of God, he can write, “Accordingly the integrity with which Adam was endowed is expressed by this word [imago]. When he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker. And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.” Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.14.6–7.
Christian thinkers was convoluted and complex, it was the Jewish doctrine of God that at once stimulated and vexed early Christian reflection on the unique significance of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The God of the Israelites was at once utterly transcendent—a cosmic Creator and Liberator, peerless among the pantheon of ancient gods, and therefore not reducible to visual form—and yet the steady Comforter, intimately involved in the affairs of the people, and therefore manifestly present to be known. This intimacy was shown through both vision and speech. As the psalmist wondered, “Who is like you, O Lord God Almighty?” (Ps 89:8) To be sure, the God of Israel remained the almighty one, the “I AM that I AM” and “Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of bondage,” but also the one who appeared to Balaam so that he could “hear the words of God” and “see the vision of the Almighty” (Nm 22–24). Yet, as we have already noted, showings and soundings such as these, Calvin says, were provisional and anticipatory, for the revelation given to the Hebrew prophets gestured at something more at every point, this something more being the nativity of God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, the image and word who signaled the summary of revelation.52

In their accounts of the event of God’s revelation Jesus Christ, New Testament authors began to unite the concepts of logos and eikon within a christological framework with implications for theological anthropology, not least of which concerned the

52 Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, 30–31. Reflecting on Jer 33:16, Calvin writes: “For the prophet, having first testified that Jesus Christ is our true God from whom all righteousness should come to us, adds as a consequence that the church will have such certain knowledge of this that it can even glory in the name,” and “The New Testament is full of countless testimonies [to the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ]; that is why I must take pains to choose a few of the most appropriate rather than gather all of them together. First it deserves to be noted that the apostles show that the things which had been predicted of the Eternal God had been fulfilled or would one day come true in Jesus Christ. As when Isaiah predicts that the God of armies will be a scandal to the Jews and Israelites, and St. Paul says that this has been accomplished in Christ; by that he indicates that Christ is the very God of armies of whom Isaiah was speaking.” Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French*, 204.
restoration or reestablishment of the image of God in humanity (broadly conceived). While the notion of humanity as bearing the divine image hearkened back to the Hebrew creation narrative of Genesis 1, the idea of Christ as enfleshed *logos* was indebted to classical Hellenistic speculation—Stoicism and, perhaps, Middle Platonic cosmological theory. In spite of its debt to the grand pagan philosophical traditions of the east, early Christian thought took a slightly different turn in its presentation of *logos* christology. Classical Stoicism and the wider Platonic tradition highlighted the ineffability of *logos* as the principle by which the visible universe maintained rational order, and as a result speculated about the necessity of the unbinding and ascent of the soul to know the unity and simplicity of this cosmic order. By contrast, early Christian authors, by emphasizing the humility of the *logos* made flesh, grounded knowledge of the concept in the action of God’s descent to meet humanity according to its finite materiality, which is to say according to its world- and time-bound circumstances. To overgeneralize, rather than privilege the ascent of rationality to contemplate the unitive *logos*, early Christian writings tended to emphasize the descent of the *logos* into the diversity and flux of the world—God made visible in the ‘lower’ form of flesh (*sarkos*). As the so-called Christ Hymn of Philippians put it, “Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the

53 For a concise historical narrative that locates Calvin’s own reflections on the concept of the *imago Dei* and its implications for a theology of human nature, see Susan E. Schreiner, “*Imago Dei*: Thou Has Made Him a Little Lower than the Angels,” in *The Theater of His Glory*, 55–72.

54 This is not to say that early Christian thought completely severed a connection to the notion of *logos* as rational organizing principle. Justin Martyr’s (d. 165 CE) words are representative: “I shall give you another testimony, my friends, from the Scriptures, that God begot before all creatures a Beginning, a certain rational power from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos,” and “As He is Father and God; the cause of His power and of His being Lord and God…. If you have followed me closely, you can see that Scripture declares that the Son was begotten of the Father before all creatures, and everybody will admit that the Son is numerically distinct from the Father!” Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 93–94, 194–95.
form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of me. Being found in the appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5–8). The humiliation of the *logos* through the taking on of flesh in early Christian soteriology is thus the inverse of the Hellenistic mythology of its grandeur and simplicity.

As Calvin reflects on the christological pictures presented in Paul’s writings (particularly, in the epistles to the Philippians, Romans, and Colossians, but also to some degree the epistle to the Hebrews, which he did not attribute to Paul)\(^5^5\) and the Fourth Gospel, he weaves together their respective emphases on the paradoxical splendor and degradation of the *logos* made flesh. Calvin remarks:

> It is [Christ] who has taken possession of all the people and all the regions of the world, extending His kingdom everywhere. Why would St. John hesitate to ascribe the majesty of God to Jesus Christ, having affirmed at the beginning of the gospel that He was God eternal? Why would St. Paul fear to place Him on the throne of God, having previously so clearly spoken of His divinity in saying that He is the blessed God eternally? In order that we may see how he preserves constantly in this idea, in another passage he says that He is God manifested in the flesh. If He is the blessed God eternally, it is He to whom all glory is due, as the same apostle teaches in another passage. Indeed, he shows us this openly, writing that Jesus Christ, since He had God’s glory, did not consider it robbery to make Himself equal to God, but He willed to bring Himself to nothing. In order that the wicked may not murmur that this was some God made in haste, St. John goes beyond this, saying that He is the true God and life eternal.\(^5^6\)

On account of the New Testament’s perspective on the inextricability of word and image in Christ, it is not possible to treat Calvin’s comments on Christ as *imago Dei* apart from his keen sense of Christ’s status as the enfleshed *logos*. Again, perhaps most crucially, it is the union between image and word in Christ’s person that is anticipated by the visions


that give rise to the speech of the Prophets, and then clarified in the writings of the apostolic witnesses. Therefore, by interrogating Calvin’s interpretation of the prophetic oracles and apostolic letters for visual concern, we can show that Calvin brings into view the transition between the prophets’ ‘seeing’ the revelation of God and the apostolic ‘beholding’ the revelation of God clearly and fully in the face of Jesus Christ. This dynamic shows up with particular sharpness in his treatment of God’s self-manifestation under the auspices of the old covenant that stands in both continuity with and contradistinction to the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. As Calvin wrote: “The glory of God is made known everywhere in scripture, but only when human eyes are enlightened by the Holy Spirit are they opened to see what should be visible to all.”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}: 1559 Latin, 1.7.5.} To be sure, without this guidance the biblical witness is a “dead and powerless thing.”\footnote{For comments on this aspect of Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Calvin’s Exegetical Principles,” \textit{Interpretation} 31, no. 4 (1977): 10–11.} And in order to understand what scripture demands, says Calvin, “pure eyes and a sound mind” are required.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}: 1559 Latin, 1.7.5.} This, of course, is part and parcel of God’s accommodating activity, which is the eternal work of God in the world through the mediating presence of the Spirit.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in Calvin’s corpus, it is in the commentaries, then, that we are able to observe his doctrine of accommodation (\textit{accomodé}) at work as a guiding principle—accommodation, as we have already mentioned, the idea that although human finitude and sin is, left to itself, a barrier to theological knowledge, it has been embraced in God’s descent into the world, and thereby overcome and, indeed, transformed. Scripture, Calvin suggests, stands as a witness to the infinite’s embrace of
the finite, such that in God’s embrace of the world, humanity has been enabled to say something, however approximate and feeble, about divinity that nevertheless corresponds to the reality that is God.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, Calvin thinks that when one expounds on the words of scripture, one’s words are tethered to God’s self-manifestation in these ancient writings such that “gross speculation” is guarded against, or at least held in check. Nevertheless, the words of the expositor, with the help of the Spirit, bring to life the truth of God’s action before the face of the contemporary congregation of faith.\textsuperscript{61} That is to say, Calvin’s commentaries attend to acts of divine accommodation—the showings and soundings of God in visual and aural form—with an eye to constructive theological comment that is to inform lived piety. As we will see as we proceed with organizing Calvin’s theology of vision, sight and visual encounter are two of the chief ways God accommodates Godself to human weakness. As he says of the visions of God set before the prophet Moses: “It was necessary that [God] should assume visible form, that he might be seen by Moses not as he was in his essence but as the infirmity of the human mind could comprehend. For thus we believe that God, as often as he appeared of old to the holy patriarchs, descended in some way (\textit{descendisse quodammodo}) from his loftiness, that he might reveal himself as far as it was useful and as far as their comprehension would admit.”\textsuperscript{62} Such a sensitive insight was not gleaned simply from cursory observation, but informed by a longstanding theological tradition that claimed the otherwise transcendent God of the cosmos made knowledge of the divine available in terms perfectly knowable to finite creatures.

\textsuperscript{60} See below, section 2.2.1.  
\textsuperscript{61} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1559 Latin}, 1.2.2, 1.13.1.  
\textsuperscript{62} Calvin, \textit{Comm. Exodus} 3:2 from CTS.
2.3.2 Rhetoric and Calvin’s Doctrine of Accommodation

When elucidating Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation as it bears upon his theology of vision, a variety of influences, theological and otherwise, could be considered. However, two influences in particular stand out. The most conspicuous is that of Augustine.63 Throughout Calvin’s corpus, tracks and traces of Augustine are evident no matter the topic, with Calvin’s doctrine of the will, account of double predestination, and semiotic theory of the eucharist being three of the most striking examples.64 It is only the church father’s verbosity and penchant for unnecessary speculation that Calvin finds problematic, and even then the criticism is tempered. Augustine’s radical skepticism concerning humanity’s ability to ‘see’ God (both literally and metaphorically) according to natural capacities was an assumption Calvin shared, particularly as it derived from the reformer’s most fundamental convictions concerning the thorough corruption of the nature of the human species coupled with an understanding of the shackled condition of the will as a consequence of disobedience.65 But most importantly for our purposes, Augustine laid groundwork for Calvin to work out the positive theological implications of what it means for God to be made experientially available through God’s works in the world.66

63 Calvin expresses his admiration of Augustine in a comment as he treats the relation between divine foreknowledge and election. He writes: “If I wanted to weave a whole volume from Augustine, I could readily show my readers that I need no other language than his” (Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 3.22.8). As we will see, the same could be said if Calvin had declared a desire to weave an entire volume on the question of the theological significance of vision.
64 For a full analysis of Augustine’s bearing on Calvin’s eucharistic theology, see below, section 3.2.
65 For comments on Calvin’s anthropological pessimism as it intersects with his theology of the vision of God, see Arnold Huijgen, Divine Accommodation in John Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 253–56.
66 Although I cannot point to a direct reference in Calvin to Augustine’s homilies on Matthew, John Cavadini highlights a theme in Augustine whereby vision serves as a metaphor for faith, which corresponds to Calvin’s theology of vision as concerns the ‘eyes’ of faith. Cavadini writes: “Augustine’s homiletic discussions of ‘mystery’ are not exhortations to blind faith, but precisely the opposite. Faith is the healing of the eye of the mind and, as such, a capacity for understanding or ‘penetrating’ mystery. Having faith in
We note, however, that recent and contemporary commentators such as Battles, Wright, and Huijgen contend that evidence is largely lacking that Augustine himself utilized a robust notion of accommodation (accommodare) and allied concepts as a means of explaining the character of God’s activity with regard to humanity’s reception of divine self-disclosure. Nevertheless, Huijgen suggests that accommodation, at least as it broadly corresponds to Calvin’s usage, is employed by Augustine in two ways: with respect to Augustine’s account of the determinative significance of the language of scripture for ‘doing’ theology, and in his reading of God’s historical dealings with Christ, whom we can see temporally, Augustine preaches, we come to understand the divinity we cannot perceive, and not simply in the eschaton but even now, in the course of a sermon: ‘How, then, are our eyes healed? Just as it’s by faith that we perceive Christ passing by in his temporal activities, so we have to understand him stopping and standing still, as Christ in his unchanging eternity. The eye is healed, you see, when it understands Christ’s divinity. Your graces must try to grasp this; pay attention to the sublime mystery [grande sacramentum] I am speaking of’ (Augustine, Sermon 88.14). On the other hand, “the mysteries of faith are such that no one, no matter how ‘learned,’ can completely grasp them in this life; before them, all, preacher and hearer, are ‘little ones to be educated’…. The continuing and permanent need for faith in the face of the mystery of the Trinity is the source of the preacher’s posturing of himself (and his rhetoric) as seeking, and as doing so on essentially the same level as those to whom he speaks. And if Scripture is, for now, ‘the face of God’ for us, we are always rendered seekers by the inexhaustible variety and depth of meaning which presents that face to us.” John C. Cavodini, “Simplifying Augustine,” in Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities, ed. John H. Van Engen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 80–81.


68 As Augustine writes in De Doctrina Christiana: “In all these books [of scripture] those who fear God and are of a meek and pious disposition seek the will of God. And in pursuing this search the first rule to be observed is, as I said, to know these books, if not yet with the understanding, still to read them so as to commit them to memory, or at least so as not to remain wholly ignorant of them. Next, those matters that are plainly laid down in them, whether rules of life or rules of faith, are to be searched into more carefully and more diligently; and the more of these a man discovers, the more capacious does his understanding become. For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life—to wit, hope and love, of which I have spoken in the previous book. After this, when we have made ourselves to a certain extent familiar with the language of Scripture, we may proceed to open up and investigate the obscure passages, and in doing so draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw light upon the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages. And in this matter memory counts for a great deal; but if the memory be defective, no rules can supply the want.” Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 2.9.14.
God’s people. This two-pronged structure is consistent with Calvin, though the reformer goes further in applying the concept to a range of theological loci. While many patristic thinkers worked with the doctrine of accommodation to explain, for example, anthropomorphism and theophany in the Torah, perceived divine passibility evinced in the emotional life of God, and other points of embarrassment from the Hebrew scriptures for early Christian philosophers, Augustine tended to focus on the doctrine’s implications for theological language within the scriptures themselves as well as its implications for later doctrinal formulations in the post-apostolic age. And though it remained troubling, he would come to understand the ‘coarse’ speech and style of the Pentateuch as evidence of God’s generous accommodation to the ignorant and unlettered, rather than as a sign of the inferior literary quality of the Hebrew writings. As Huijgen writes of Augustine:

“God’s accommodation in Biblical language particularly shows in anthropomorphic expressions, but the whole Bible is accommodated, since it uses uncomplicated language. Therefore, [for Augustine] humans should not haughtily, despise this Biblical lowliness, but should realize that the Bible’s simplicity is fit for their limited understanding, and

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69 Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 85. Jon Balserak’s reading of accommodation in Augustine detects more widespread usage. He suggests that for Augustine the entire biblical record shows the accommodated character of God’s will. In addition, the sacraments, the doctrine of hell, and the Incarnation are all features of God’s larger accommodating activity—an insight that was taken up by Luther and his colleagues, which then spread as part of ‘the Augustinian reading’ taken up by leading reformation figures such as Zwingli and Musculus. Balserak, *Divinity Compromised*, 16–22.

70 Take, for example, Calvin’s use of accommodation as it relates to his doctrine of providence and understanding of natural theology. Commenting on Amos 4:9, he writes: “God indeed does not govern the world, according to what profane men think, as though he gave uncontrolled license both in heaven and earth; but he now withholds rain, then he pours in down in profusion; he now burns the corn with heat, then he temperates the air; he now shows himself kind to me, then he shows himself angry with them. Let us then learn to refer the whole order of nature to the special providence of God. I mention his special providence, lest we should dream only of some general operation, as ungodly men do: but let us know that God would have himself to be seen in daily events, so that the tokens of his love may make us to rejoice, and also that the tokes of his wrath may humble us, to the end that we may repent. Let this then be learnt from the present words of the Prophet.” Calvin, *Commentary on Amos* 4:9 from CTS.

humbly surrender to Biblical truth.”

Corresponding to this, as Calvin famously wrote in the *Institutes*: “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.”

Thus, unlike Augustine, Calvin is not as troubled by the low literary quality of scripture, but he does take from the church father the insight that scripture demonstrates God’s paternal care for God’s people—that God graciously descends to make the divine wisdom known according to the terms of the mercurial creaturely condition, which, as a result, ought to cultivate an attitude of gratitude and humility on the part of humanity.

The second major influence on Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation derives from his immediate social and intellectual context—as we have said, early modern humanism, a diverse and complicated movement across the universities of 16th-century Europe—particularly its recovery of classical rhetoric in theological argument. E. David Willis suggests the specific methodological strain Calvin inherited was that of “rhetorical correlation,” a notion traceable to Cicero, which accented distinction for the sake of union between terms for the purpose of “rendering the truth effective” for a given audience. By highlighting so-called rhetorical correlation in Calvin, Willis opposes the notion that the reformer was simply a late medieval dialectician who utilized the “diastatic nominalist mode of argument” that celebrated indeterminate speculation, the

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72 Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 86.
sharp disjunction between terms and concepts, and the unresolved conflict of opposites as the essence of the theological task.\textsuperscript{75} In other words, according to Willis, Calvin was interested in distinguishing biblical concepts in order to unite them for the purpose of helping his audience better grasp the coherence of divine self-revelation in the variegated divine works. And this teaching activity, we might add, was treated an extension of the broader condescending activity of God.\textsuperscript{76}

For Calvin, authorization for this rhetorical approach arises from the ‘logic’ that can be discerned in scripture itself, brought about through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{77} Along with his Protestant colleagues, Calvin saw the task of unfolding the divine pedagogy as basic to the calling of a minister laboring in ‘the schoolhouse of God,’ because such labor was in keeping with the manner of labor exhibited in the prophets and apostles. Witness to the acts God with an eye to persuasion (\textit{persuasio}) was the key. As Calvin wrote of the humble ministry of Paul described in 1 Corinthians, two questions can be proposed with respect to the apostles’ rejection of secular eloquence in preaching the foolishness of Christ’s cross:

First, whether Paul here condemns in every respect the wisdom of words, as opposed to Christ; and secondly, whether he means that eloquence and the doctrine of the gospel are invariably opposed, so they cannot agree together, and that the preaching of the gospel is vitiated, if the slightest tincture of eloquence and rhetoric (\textit{eloquence et rhetorique}) is made use of.

\textsuperscript{75} Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 43. Whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, there is doubt this so-called “diastatic nominalist” approach has been an influential lens through which to read Calvin, particularly with respect to his anthropology, where he appears to draw a sharp, unresolved distinction between humanity and God, creature and Creator, the former revolting and low, the latter glorious and set apart. Mary Potter Engel takes up this issue in her excellent study, \textit{John Calvin’s Perspectival Anthropology} (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988). See also Thomas F. Torrance, \textit{Calvin’s Doctrine of Man} (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997); and Serene Jones, \textit{Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

\textsuperscript{76} As it was written of Calvin’s teacher, Martin Bucer: “He intends to keep the \textit{ad verbum}, to threat the [biblical] text \textit{verbatim}, and to give the \textit{germanum sensum}, ‘so as to place the sure and genuine image of Christ before the reader’s eyes.’” Parker, \textit{Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries}, 79.

for adorning it. To the first of these I answer—that it were quite unreasonable to suppose, that Paul would utterly condemn those arts which, it is manifest, are excellent gifts of God, and which serve as instruments as it were, to assist men in the accomplishment of important purposes. As for those arts, then, that have nothing of superstition, but contain good learning, and solid wisdom (une bonne erudition, et sçauoir solide), and are founded on just principles, as they are useful and suited to the common transactions of human life, so there can be no doubt that they have come forth from the Holy Spirit; and the advantage which is derived and experienced from them, ought to be ascribed exclusively to God. What Paul says…ought not to be taken as throwing any disparagement upon the arts, as if they were unfavorable to piety.78

When Calvin approaches scripture he is concerned with clarifying its content for the sake of lived piety, the “advantage of which,” as he says, “ought to be ascribed exclusively to God.” Thus humanism’s attention to rhetoric as part of the task of persuasion complements Calvin’s use of a patristic authority like Augustine, in that Calvin’s use of both is for the purpose of laying bare the truth. To be sure, Calvin’s turn to patristic sources coupled with a recovery of classical rhetorical methods stem from early modern humanism’s wider resourcing of ancient learning—Jewish, pagan, and Christian alike—a movement that when placed in the service of theology was not, for Protestants like Calvin and his ilk, simply concerned with a turn “back to the sources” (ad fontes) but Christium praedicare ex fontibus (“Christ preached from the sources”).

Placing Calvin’s use of rhetorical correlation in conversation with his understanding of the doctrine accommodation can give us insight into the various ways he connects seemingly opposed categories like the vision of the body and vision of the soul, or the prophetic experience of visually encountering God through the oracle and vision prior to and apart from the apostolic encounter with God made flesh. Moreover, considering the impact of the patristic sources as part of humanism’s wider influence

78 Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 1:17 from CTS; emphasis mine.
sheds light on the rhetorical roots of the crucial idea that God has accommodated to human capacity in order that divine truth “may be rendered more effective.”"\(^7^9\) As we shall see in the following chapter, when Calvin takes up the principle of accommodation to help explain God’s condescension to humanity at the level of bodily need, he is keen to emphasize the range of bodily experiences (seeing, hearing, taste, and touch) that are accommodated to in this activity, not least of which is vision. For example, on the impending judgment of Israel prophesied in Isaiah 19:5–6, Calvin remarks: “On account of our stupidity those calamities are represented to us in a lively manner, which places them before our eyes; for we need to have a representation made to us which is fitted to impress our minds, and to arouse us to consider that judgment of God, which otherwise we despise.”\(^8^0\) According to this reading, it is only fitting, we might say, that embodied creatures encounter both divine judgment and divine mercy according to their bodily capacities, rather than in some abstract, “far off” way. It is on account of our bodily, material condition that Calvin can say both judgment and mercy must be “placed before our eyes.”

To sum up: while elements of patristic theology and the influence of classical rhetoric are often quite apparent in Calvin, it is more difficult to discern the pagan philosophical influences, ancient or otherwise (in spite of the importance of these sources for informing crucial elements of Calvin’s thought).\(^8^1\) These are typically muted because of Calvin’s fondness for disparaging philosophical speculation, particularly of the later medieval “schoolmen” variety. Despite his antagonism towards such perceived speculation, Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation—which, as noted, itself relies on


\(^8^0\) Calvin, *Comm. Isaiah*, 2:54–55 from CTS.

\(^8^1\) See comments above in chapter 1, sections 1.3.1–1.3.2.
philosophical construction even as it draws on an extensive tradition of philosophical theological reflection—is one of the most celebrated concepts in his theology (and this even in spite of the fact that, as Calvin acknowledges, it is not a concept explicitly spelled out in scripture). Nevertheless, the doctrine remains central to Calvin’s understanding of God, theological anthropology, and account of the way in which God encounters humanity in the world. We thus introduce and highlight the concept in order to emphasize its paramount importance for framing how Calvin treats the prophetic and apostolic encounters with God through vision and speech, *visio* and *verbum*. Famously, the doctrine is summed up in Calvin’s declaration referenced above—that God deigns to “lisp with us,” or, we might say, “show” the faithful something of divinity precisely in and according to humanity’s weakness.

2.4.1 *Texts on Vision and Visual Accommodation in Calvin’s Commentaries*

Now that we have a description of the place of the commentaries within the scope of Calvin’s broader theological corpus, as well as comments on some of the most salient features of his understanding of scripture and approach to biblical interpretation, we can turn to particular biblical passages where Calvin deals with the theological import of vision. These passages from the prophetic works and early apostolic letters and accounts of the life of Jesus shed light on the reformer’s sensitive yet critical approach to the visual across a range of intricate texts. By examining this biblical commentary, we make our first pass at lifting up the crucial place of vision and visual metaphor in his theology. This material will be clarified and extended in the chapters that follow. In terms of historical chronology, although Calvin prepared the New Testament commentaries first, we will
begin with material from the Old Testament commentaries, then proceed to material from
the New in order to get a sense of how Calvin understands the New Testament’s use of
the Old. The texts in question are as follows.82

From the Old Testament commentaries, we will consider two parts of the Major
Prophets: Ezekiel 1:3–20 and Isaiah 6:1–5. And from the Minor Prophets, these passages
will be taken up: Amos 1:1–2:5, 4:2–3; and Nahum 1:3–5. From the New Testament
commentaries, we will begin with the Gospel of Luke: Luke 24:30–32 (with reference to
Luke 22:7–28 and parallels from the synoptics). And from the letters of Paul to the
Romans and Corinthians: Romans 1:18–22, 2:28–29, and 5:1–2; 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 and

Again, while passages beyond these could be taken up from the biblical commentaries
that feature Calvin’s reflection on visual themes, these passages can be taken as
representative—setting out, though not comprehensively, how Calvin understands the
place of the visual across diverse theological sources from the prophetic and apostolic
witnesses.

2.4.2 Prophetic and Apostolic Visions of God

For Calvin, the teaching authority of the apostles in the early church is tied to the
authority of the prophets to speak on behalf of God at key junctures in the history of
Israel. The foundation of this relationship between prophet and apostle was the
Abrahamic covenant that would manifest itself as the covenant with all flesh in the
advent of God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Stephen Edmondson writes of Calvin on the
prophetic and apostolic proclamation of God’s presence with God’s people:

82 All English translations of the biblical texts are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
The prophets proclaimed and described the reign of the coming Messiah, but always with an eye to the reassurance of God’s people in their present struggles, binding the people in faith and hope more tightly to God’s covenant, to which the promised Messiah was attached. Indeed, inherent in the future promise was always a present promise—release from captivity in Babylon, for example—and the present reality of the Church’s adoption by God. The prophet, then, sought to bind the Church to God not only by speaking of what Christ would do, but also of what he had done and was doing in the Church’s midst.\(^3\)

The appearance of God’s Messiah was inextricably bound to the prophetic call to Israel to remember the covenant, the covenant understood as a trans-historical ethical and political reality that started with the call of one man and would culminate with the renewal of all creation. As Susan Schreiner summarizes Calvin on the unity of the Hebrew and apostolic witnesses: “Calvin’s arguments for the fundamental unity of the Old and New Testaments are inseparable from his view of providence and redemption. In Calvin’s view, God’s redemptive purpose encompasses creation to the second coming. As the realm of God’s creation and action, all history unfolds under the divine plan of salvation. There is an ‘Irenaean’ sense of history in Calvin’s thought: God is reclaiming, renewing, or ‘recapitulating’ the whole of creation and history.”\(^4\) As the substance of the covenant, the Messiah revealed the goal towards which the faith and hope of Israel was striving. Thus the prophets, who nurtured Israel’s hope of liberation through the appointed Messiah, and the apostles, who proclaimed the good news of the Messiah’s appearance and second coming, both testified to the continuous unfolding salvific action of God in history.

As we proceed, then, with an analysis of Calvin’s exegesis of the vision of God amongst the Hebrew prophets, we do so bearing in mind that the ground of prophetic

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\(^4\) Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory*, 108.
speech and the prophets’ interpretation of the divine oracles is, for Calvin, a covenantal one ultimately oriented to the revelation of God in the Messiah. Accordingly, while prophetic activity is a discrete manner of witness, it cannot, in the end, be understood apart from the divine self-unveiling in Jesus Christ, a point to which Calvin returns repeatedly throughout his exegesis of the prophets.

2.4.3 Seeing God in an Oracle of Ezekiel (Ez 1:3–20)

The word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there.

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. Each moved straight ahead; wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning.

As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the living creatures rose from

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85 As Calvin remarks in his commentary on Rom 3:2, “By ‘oracles’ [Paul] means the covenant which God revealed first to Abraham and to his posterity, and afterwards sealed an unfolded by the law and the Prophets” (Calvin, Comm. Romans 3:2 from CTS).
the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

This is one of the strangest passages in the books of the prophets, not only because of the imagery but also because of the level of detail in which the oracle is described. Calvin recognizes the otherworldly quality of the vision when he contends that Ezekiel’s authority as a teacher of Israel had to be expressly established and defended by an appeal to “the hand of God” actively guiding him. Without this appeal to divine accompaniment, the oracle,\(^{86}\) it appears, would descend into incoherence and absurdity. As Calvin writes: “There is…an inward efficacy of the Holy Spirit when [Ezekiel] sheds forth his power upon hearers, that they may embrace a discourse by faith, so also if all hearers were deaf, and God’s word should evaporate as smoke, yet there is an intrinsic virtue in the prophecies themselves: Ezekiel points out this as given to him by God.” And yet there is in Ezekiel’s oracle “a vision…whose obscurity so deterred the Jews that they forbade every attempt to explain it.”\(^{87}\) Indeed, when read against the range of other prophecies spoken to Israel, these opening lines of Ezekiel present a significant challenge to the interpreter, much as it did, says Calvin, to the original audience—to be sure, Ezekiel presents “the most difficult of all” prophecies.\(^ {88}\) Nevertheless, the conviction remains that despite the enigmatic nature of the words and images found here, true

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\(^{86}\) We note Parker’s comment that “oracle” and “vision” in Calvin’s commentary on the prophets are largely interchangeable terms: “Calvin does not confine ‘oracle’ to speech, but uses it also for visions…. But when it refers to speech, it will mean a direct speaking by God, a speaking without a prophet or interpreter” (Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 115–16). This generalization appears largely to hold for the passages we consider below.

\(^{87}\) Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:3 from CTS

\(^{88}\) Calvin does not protect Ezekiel himself from this error. As he comments on 1:7, “As to *the sparks which shone like polished brass or steel*, we know that this similitude often occurs in Scripture, for whenever God wishes to render his servants attentive, he proposes new figures which may excite their admiration. This very thing happened to our Prophet, because if the usual fleshy color had appeared in these animals, this perhaps would have been neglected: even the Prophet had not considered the meaning of the vision with sufficient attention. But when he saw the glistening thighs and sparks shining in every direction, as if from polished steel, then he was compelled to apply his mind more attentively to this vision.” Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:7 from CTS.
knowledge of God is available for all who “refuse to shut their eyes to the truth.” The prophet, like the priest, serves the truth, rather than commands it.

In order to get a conceptual grip on this material, Calvin’s utilizes two concepts when unpacking the heart of the oracle in verses 4–9. First, as an interpreter, he claims to be concerned with “the intention of the vision” and, second, with the teaching of Ezekiel contained therein.\(^8^9\) The categories of intention and teaching do not stand separate from one another, but are bound together by what Calvin calls analogy (analogia) or resemblance (similitudo). Therefore, the “visions of God” that Ezekiel saw (vidi visiones Dei, “I have seen the visions of God”) are neither to be interpreted literally nor overly figuratively, but should be unpacked according to their symbolic qualities that speak first to the historical, social, and political contexts in which they were originally given.\(^9\) Only then, Calvin thinks, can the visions be unfolded organically and then meaningfully applied to a contemporary audience. To err in the direction of either a rigorously literal or figuratively speculative reading would be to undercut the teaching of the passage. Likewise, the doctrine conveyed in the words of the prophet stands in a symbiotic relationship with the imagery of vision itself. Calvin comments:

The Prophet’s duty lay among a hard-hearted and rebellious people; their arrogance required to be subdued, for otherwise the Prophet had spoken to the deaf. But God had another end in view. An analogy or resemblance is to be held between this vision and the Prophet’s doctrine. This is one object… but the special reason which I touched upon must be considered—viz., that God shortly points out by this symbol [i.e., the opening images], for what purpose he sends his Prophet. For the visions have as great a likeness to the doctrine as possible.\(^9\)

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\(^8^9\) Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:3 from CTS; emphasis mine.

\(^9\) As he says in his prefatory remarks on the prophecy of Micah: “For at this day his sermons would be useless, or at least frigid, except his time were known to us, and we thereby enabled to compare what is alike and what is different in the men of his age, and in those of our own.” Calvin, *Comm. Micah* 1:1 from CTS.

\(^9\) Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:4 from CTS.
Setting out this approach allows Calvin to connect, for example, “the storm coming from the north” (1:4) with the glory of God being manifest before the people as wrath and judgment. In other words, the natural disaster reveals something true about the state of the people as well as something true about the nature of God, namely, that calamity is on the horizon as a result of an injured relationship between God and Israel. Similarly, “the four living creatures” that are enumerated immediately after are read as symbolic of the servant posture of the heavenly hosts, which points to divine majesty spelled out in images of God’s enthronement in the holy sanctuary (with roots in Ex 20:18 and Nm 7:89, which speak of the images of the cherubim depicted on the Ark of the Covenant).

As one might expect, Calvin goes onto explain that these graphic images in Ezekiel were for the sake of accommodation—God accommodating to the capacities of an ancient people through images, however brute and strange, that were intelligible to them and appropriate to their historical time and place.

Calvin contends that the accommodating activity of God in the vision is granted due to the peoples’ spiritual blindness, sloth, and hardness of heart.92 Therefore, the prophet is required “to bend his discourse to the rudeness of the people,” a rudeness that arose due to the nation’s rebellion against God through rejection of the law.93 Ezekiel, then, as a priest intimately familiar with the religious requirements of Israel, understands

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92 Along these lines, Calvin utilizes the doctrine of accommodation to explain the “appearance of God under visible form” spoken of in 1:25–26, which is then connected to the supreme accommodating activity of God under the form of the flesh of Christ. Calvin intimates that God affixes Godself to visible form not to contain the divine essence, but to appear intelligible to the created gaze. See Calvin, Comm. Ezekiel 1:25–26 from CTS.

93 Calvin makes a similar argument regarding the fantastic nature of Isaiah’s vision in Is 6. See his comments in Calvin, Comm. Isaiah 1:6. Along these lines, Calvin highlights the ocular metaphors present in the prophet Joel’s warnings, where the prophet speaks of judgment being “set before the face of the people.” Calvin, Comm. Joel 2:6 from CTS.
that the religion itself had effectively fallen into disuse, diminished and reduced to a
series of banal obligations with no orientation to God. As Calvin explains:

> For their religion had become so obsolete, and their contempt of the law so
great that the Jews were ignorant of the use of the Sanctuary; then they so
worshipped God as if he were at a distance from them, and entirely
rejected his providential care over human affairs. Here, then, we see how
gross was their stupor, so that though often stricken, they never were
aroused. Because the Jews were thus completely torpid, it became needful
to propose to them a new form, and so the Prophet chooses half of it from
the Sanctuary itself, and assumes the other half, as it was required for so
rude a people; although he did not manufacture anything out of his own
mind, for I am now speaking of the counsel of the Holy Spirit. God was,
therefore, unwilling to drive the Jews away from the sanctuary, for that
was the foundation of all right understanding of truth.⁹⁴

Rather than drive Israel into deeper exile, and thus deeper despair, the vision that Ezekiel
places before the people functions as a call back to God’s residence place, the holy
sanctuary, which is the supreme dwelling place of God. This is effectively an invitation to
renewed intimacy between the people of Israel and their God.

> It is at the temple sanctuary that Israel reckons with its own blindness and
spiritual distance from the Lord. The “violence” of the visions unfolded in these opening
oracles therefore have as their goal a shaking of the people out of torpor and sloth.⁹⁵

Calvin contends that Israel has misinterpreted its exilic status, attributing it to the grind of
indifferent cosmic fate, thus implying that the God of Israel is a deity who is detached
from present circumstances. The image of the eye-studded wheel with the wheel becomes
a counter-image to that of aloof “blind fortune,” for it sees all in as a cosmic constant.⁹⁶

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⁹⁴ Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:4 from CTS.
⁹⁵ Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:18 from CTS
⁹⁶ Similarly, as Calvin comments on the intertwined wheels of 1:16: “Here God represents to us to the life
what experience teaches. For first, the world is carried, along just as the wheels run round, and that, too, not
simply but with such great variety that God seems to send forth his impelling force, now to the right hand
and now to the left. This, then, is as if two wheels were entangled together.” Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:16
from CTS.
The imagery of the all-seeing wheels becomes a metaphor for the stayed presence of God with God’s people. The heart of the teaching, then, is that:

The changes of the world are so connected together, that all motion depends upon the angels, whom he guides according to his will. Hence the wheels are said to be full of eyes. I think that God opposed this form of the wheels to the foolish opinion of men, because men fancy Fortune blind, and that all things roll on in a kind of turbulent confusion. God, then, when he compares the changes which happen in the world to wheels, calls them “full of eyes,” to show that nothing is done with rashness or through the blind impulse of fortune. This imagination surely arises from our blindness: we are blind in the midst of light, and therefore when God works, we think that he turns all things upside down; and because we dare not utter such gross blasphemy against him, we say that Fortune acts without consideration, but in the meantime we transfer the empire of God to Fortune itself…. This is our condition: we are blind, as I have already said, and yet we wish to throw the cause of our blindness upon God himself; and because we do not dare openly to bring a charge against him, we impose upon him the name of fortune; and for this reason the Prophet says the wheels have eyes.97

In order to confront the basic theological error of the people, the spectacular visions of Ezekiel are placed before them in order that their misplaced attribution of blindness to God might be exposed. This, then, is the symbolic import of the eye-encrusted wheels: not only will human blindness be revealed for what it is—unfaithfulness resulting from rebellion or indifference—but this blindness can be turned to sight in the form of the gaze of God’s people being lifted to God in order that God may be truly known.98

97 Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:4 from CTS.
98 The prayer appended to this section of the lectures is apposite: “Almighty God, since by our dullness we are so fixed down to earth that, when thou stretchest forth thine hand to us, we cannot reach forth to thee, grant, that being roused up by thy Spirit, we may learn to raise our affections to thee, and to strive against our sluggishness, until by a nearer approach thou mayest become so familiarly known to us, that at length we may arrive at the fruition of full and perfect glory laid up for us in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel*, Second Lecture from CTS. Similarly, Calvin attributes the order and regularity of creation to the activity of God in the cosmos that descends from the heavens. Commenting on 1:11 (with reference to Is 6), Calvin writes: “The reason why the rings were joined together upwards is sufficiently clear; because God has such different motions, and so agitates the earth, that the things which seem to be conflicting are most in unison. The joining, then, was upwards, that is, with respect to God himself, because on earth there often appears dreadful confusion, and the works of God, as far as we can understand them, appear mutually discordant: but whoever raises his eyes to heaven will see the greatest
In terms of the oracles’ telos, Calvin reads them as addressing ancient historical realities with contemporary import. Commenting on 1:3, he notes that the dramatic color (electrum) and imagery described by the prophet presents “a symbol of God’s glory” given “for the Church at large,” which encompasses both the present and ancient gatherings of God’s people.⁹⁹ As God is active in the affairs of all creation, so God is intimately active in the affairs of God’s people to which the work of the angels and spirits noted in 1:12 testify. Accordingly, Calvin writes: “this vision has no other meaning than to inform the Prophet that God does not desert his works in the middle of their course, as he says in Psalm 138:8. Since, therefore, in the works of God, there is nothing unfinished or mutilated, the angels go forward, and finish their allotted space till the goal: they afterwards return like lightning.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, this work of the heavenly hosts in creation and their return to God “like lightening” serves to disabuse the people of their false images of God. That is to say, the angels and spirits manifest the paternal nature of true divinity in the midst of Israel’s sense of abandonment. As Calvin comments, “Thus [through these visions] God wished to show the vigor of his own spirit in all actions, that we should not measure it in our manner, according to the depravity which is innate with us. For when we discourse concerning the works of God, we conceive what our reason comprehends, and we wish in some way to affix in our minds an image of God. But God shows that when he works there is a wonderful vigor, as if fire were moving to and fro. Hence that vigor is incomprehensible to us.”¹⁰¹ Here, Calvin returns to a favorite theme:

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⁹⁹ Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:11 from CTS.
¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:12 from CTS.
¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel* 1:13 from CTS.
the oracles of the prophets ultimately serve the purpose of casting down effigies of the divine hewn from the stone of human speculation.

To summarize, we noted that Calvin begins his exegesis of Ezekiel by acknowledging the interpretive challenge presented in the opening oracles. Rather than dwell on the fantastic nature of the imagery or quickly move past it due to its obscurity, he seeks to uncover the fundamental doctrine conveyed in the prophetic visions by attending to the imagery itself. This means, at the very least, that the visual (i.e., mental imaging and the word pictures drawn by the prophets) is treated as indispensable to the task of forming theological claims. Again, prophetic vision and prophetic speech stand in a mutually reinforcing relationship with one another, which is to say that Ezekiel’s claims about the nature of God cannot be understood apart from the visual encounter with God narrated in the text. Three basic themes emerge when Calvin considers the doctrine transmitted in the opening oracles of Ezekiel. First, the very fact that God provided these showings to the prophet speaks to God’s gracious condescension to Israel in spite of its rebellion and neglect of the covenant. Second, the created world—and, by extension, the covenantal people even in exile—has not be abandoned to brute chance meted out by an indifferent Fate, but is preserved and upheld by a benevolent Sustainer who preserves order in the midst of calamity. Third, and finally, these spectacular oracles are not ends in themselves, but serve to raise the created gaze upward to God—who is, Calvin is keen to remark, an invisible reality but nevertheless available to be known—thereby healing spiritual blindness produced by rebellion.
2.4.4 Seeing God in an Oracle of Isaiah (Is 6:1–5)

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Aside from two passages in the Pentateuch (i.e., Jacob’s vision of God in Gn 32:30 and that of Moses mentioned in Ex 33:11 and Dt 34:10), this is the only place where a Hebrew prophet claims to have seen God without qualification. This vision, which comes after an initial divine showing, is granted to Isaiah, Calvin explains, in order to confirm his call as a prophet and teacher of Israel. Calvin draws a parallel between the prophet and the confirmation of the teaching authority of the apostles following the resurrection of Jesus narrated in John 20 and Acts 2. As the apostles were encouraged for mission by their strange post-resurrection encounters with Jesus, so “it was necessary that Isaiah should be encouraged and again attested by a new vision; that he might be excited to perseverance, and might afterwards proceed with greater cheerfulness in his course; and also that the Jews might perceive his ministry to be supported by heavenly authority.”

While from a practical vantage point Isaiah’s vision authorizes him to speak both judgment and blessing over Israel on behalf of God, a pressing theological question

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102 Calvin, *Comm. Isaiah* 6:1 from CTS.
103 In his commentary on Joel, Calvin speaks of the graphic nature of divine judgment that is set out in the visions of the prophets: “And [Joel] now exclaims, as though the day of Jehovah was set before his eyes, and he calls it the day of Jehovah, because in that day God would stretch forth his hand to execute judgment.” Calvin, *Comm. Joel* 1:13 from CTS. According to Calvin, the vivid display that Isaiah sees serves a similar function, namely to wake the people from spiritual slumber, beginning with the prophet himself.
persists: How could he—as Calvin puts it, referring to John 4:24—“see the God who is spirit”? The commentator gives a two-part answer. On the one hand, the seemingly unmediated vision of divinity to which Isaiah attests is fundamentally cloaked in mystery because “the understandings of men cannot rise to [God’s] boundless height.”104 One simply cannot comprehend, much less adequately describe, what it is like to “see” God, since the essence of God is itself incomprehensible. Therefore, Calvin contends that the reader should not press beyond the symbolic imagery offered by the prophet, a theme we encountered in his comments on Ezekiel 1. A ‘literal’ reading of the oracle, or one that presses beyond the boundaries of the event—as if we were to envisage the prophet laying his eyes on a concrete object called “God”—is cautioned against. On the other hand, Calvin invokes the familiar doctrine of divine accommodation. He writes:

We ought to be aware that, when God exhibited himself to the view of the Fathers, he never appeared such as he actually is, but such as the capacity of men could receive. Though men may be said to creep on the ground, or at least dwell far below the heavens, there is no absurdity in supposing that God comes down to them in such a manner as to cause some kind of mirror to reflect the rays of his glory. There was, therefore, exhibited to Isaiah such a form as enabled him, according to his capacity, to perceive the inconceivable majesty of God; and thus he attributes to God a throne, a robe, and a bodily appearance.

Eschewing unnecessary intellectual labor over the problem God’s circumscription in bodily, material form, Calvin opts instead to characterize the vision as serving a didactic function, namely to confirm the divine presence both to prophet and to the people. The vision placed before Isaiah’s visual sensorium as mental imagery, which confirms the divine presence, is thus a true vision of God, one that establishes divine presence. However, it is not a vision whereby God is known according to God’s essence, since that would reduce God to the plane of created material things.

104 Calvin, Comm. Isaiah 6:1 from CTS.
Appealing to Colossians 1:15, Calvin entertains the interpretive possibility, established in the older interpretive tradition, that what Isaiah ‘saw’ in the moment of God’s self-unveiling as mental imagery was “the glory of Christ,” since Christ was, says Calvin, even at that moment, “the image of the invisible God.” However, Calvin does not limit the object of the prophet’s vision to Jesus Christ, as he contends the Hebrew word adonai “is often applied to God in an absolute and unrestricted manner.” While Calvin appears to prefer the latter option—the object of the vision being God defined “indefinitely”—he holds open the christological interpretive possibility in spite of the historical location of the vision under that of the Hebrew dispensation. At the very least, Calvin is clear in his comments on this passage that the vision of God in Christ forms the objective content of the vision of God the prophets were given, which is to say that when the disciples and apostles “saw God in Christ,” they were gazing upon the selfsame God as the one upon which the prophets gazed.

As creatures encountering the glory of God, the seraphim described in 6:2 serve as a kind of mirror to the prophet. While Calvin appears to entertain the reality of the existence of the angels and seraphim in the highly metaphorical “heavenly courts,” the point of their presence is to exhibit the ideal of a created being’s beholding of “the brightness of God’s infinite majesty” in order that the prophet may, too, “learn by it to behold and adore [God’s] wonderful and overwhelming glory.” The brightness of this divine majesty, Calvin notes, requires that the angelic hosts veil their faces—they cannot

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105 Calvin, Comm. Isaiah 6:1 from CTS.
106 Jon Balserak’s work deals with Calvin’s complex account of christology and divine accommodation. As with Calvin’s comments here, Balserak shows that accommodation is not reducible to the Incarnation event, and, indeed, that Calvin often speaks of God accommodating to human capacity without appeal to christological explanations. See Jon Balserak, “‘The Accommodating Act Par Excellence?’: An Inquiry into the Incarnation and Calvin’s Understanding of Accommodation,” Scottish Journal of Theology 55, no. 4 (2002): 408–23.
107 Calvin, Comm. Isaiah 6:2 from CTS.
behold God with uncovered face lest they be blinded and burned up. This, too, serves a didactic function for Calvin: while “we too ought to look at God,” we should do so “soberly and modestly” and only insofar as “our capacity shall enable us.” Here, Calvin explicitly ties the vision of God to the knowledge of God, noting that just as the vision the angels enjoy is one of beholding, and thus intimately knowing, this vision is nevertheless an inexhaustible one that is and always will be incomplete on account of the finite capacities of the beholder.\textsuperscript{108}

Further developing the visual themes in the passage, the coal with which the prophet’s tongue is touched in 6:7 takes on a surprising sacramental resonance for Calvin. Rejecting a reading of this episode that would claim the coal and other sacramental elements were endowed with supernatural (or ‘magical’) power, he contends that the coal serves as an outward sign of “a sacred pledge from God,” whereby a sacrament was placed on the lips of the prophet, “not that he could not be cleansed without the coal, but because the visible sign was useful for the confirmation and proof of the fact.” Calvin continues, “And such is the use of sacraments, to strengthen us in proportion to our ignorance; for we are not angels, that can behold the mysteries of God without any assistance, and therefore he raises us to himself by gradual advances.” Accordingly, “the Lord holds out [these sacramental helps]…not to feed our eyes with an empty and unmeaning figure,” but “to act upon us efficaciously.”\textsuperscript{109} The efficacy of the sacrament is linked to the efficacy of the Christian eucharistic elements, wherein the divine power of

\textsuperscript{108} “Now, if it be true that we cannot behold the small and feeble rays of the Divine brightness without being altogether overpowered, how could we gaze upon that unspeakably bright and glorious majesty which lays prostrate all our faculties? Let men learn, therefore, that they are far distant from a perfect knowledge of God, since they cannot even reach to the angels. The latter appears to me to be the more correct exposition, but I do not disapprove of the former.” Calvin, \textit{Comm. Isaiah} 6:2 from CTS.

\textsuperscript{109} Calvin, \textit{Comm. Isaiah} 6:7 from CTS.
Jesus Christ is presented and made spiritually efficacious to the communicant. Calvin here operates with an expansive understanding of the sacramental rooted in the visual: the visible sign of the live coal in Isaiah, like the visible signs of bread and wine in the Christian eucharist, serve to lift frail humanity up to God with the help of God’s Spirit.  

Indeed, in his closing comments on the pericope, Calvin goes so far as to claim that the content of the entire vision given to Isaiah is Christ himself, even if the prophet was ignorant of this reality. “For although God exhibited to the Prophet the lively image of himself in Christ, still it is certain that whatever he communicated was wholly breathed into him by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The essence of Isaiah’s vision is thus interpreted as a Spirit-mediated encounter with the divine mysteries in Christ.

To draw this analysis to a close, the vision recounted in Isaiah 6 is unique in the Hebrew witness in that it presents a prophet’s categorical account of the vision of God. The severe nature of the vision serves to contrast the majesty of God with the impurity of Israel via the synecdochic function of the prophet, who confesses that he is himself unclean. As with Calvin’s commentary on Ezekiel 1, the vision serves to confirm the status of the prophet as a mouthpiece of God. More than confirming the authority of the prophet, Calvin contends that this face-to-face vision is as an act of grace whereby God condescended to be known according to the created capacities of the prophet. Similarly, the incident of the cleansing of Isaiah’s mouth is interpreted an act of divine grace but

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110 The implication is that the live coal mentioned in Isaiah and the bread and wine of the Christian eucharist parallel one another such that coal could be seen as the bread and wine can be seen. However, given that Calvin suggests earlier in his comments on the passage that Isaiah’s vision is a mental picturing of events related to his particular encounter with God, it would appear the parallel does not actually hold, because bread and wine are concrete objects that can be sensed by multiple subjects, while Isaiah’s experience of the live coal appears to be shut off from other participants. The ambiguity, which Calvin leaves unresolved, turns on the implicit parallel between concrete objects and ‘objects’ experienced only as mental picturing.

111 Calvin, *Comm. Isaiah* 6:10 from CTS.
with a deeper sacramental, indeed christological, resonance—when the prophet tastes the flaming coal, God visually exhibited an otherwise hidden favor, namely, that only God can cleanse human impurity. God’s visual self-unveiling—the prophet’s encounter with divinity through the gift of mental picturing—is thus the ground of prophetic speech. The efficacy of this Isaianic sacrament derives from activity of the Spirit, which is of a piece with the Spirit’s activity in the Christian sacraments, whereby God in Christ is offered as spiritual cleansing and nourishment.

2.4.5 Seeing God in the Words of Amos

2.4.5.1 Amos 1:1–2:5

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said: The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up. Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kir, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they carried in to exile entire communities, to hand them over to Edom. So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, fire that shall devour its strongholds. I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and the one who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, says the Lord God.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they delivered entire communities over to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of kinship. So I will send a fire on the wall of Tyre, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity; he
maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever. So I will send a fire on Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory. So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah, fire that shall devour its strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a storm on the day of the whirlwind; then their king shall go into exile, he and his officials together, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. So I will send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its officials with him, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.

As we have already noted, Calvin begins his commentary on Amos by remarking that words of the prophet were given by visual revelation. In the strict sense, the words that Amos spoke “were words revealed to him from above,” such that the prophet “saw by revelation.” As with Ezekiel and Isaiah, the visual manifestation of the oracles to Amos served to confirm his ministry in Israel. However, Calvin notes that unlike the ministries of Ezekiel and Isaiah, who were connected to the priestly caste, Amos is called from one of the lowest social strata of his society (which, Calvin also remarks, runs parallel to the social standing of the first apostles), thus underscoring the power and importance of the vision handed down “to humble the dignity of the world,” so that “the power of God may be made more evident.” In Amos, then, we find an example of an even more explicit authorization of prophetic speech flowing from visual revelations interior to the prophet that are made public through prophetic declaration.

112 Calvin, Comm. Amos 1:1 from CTS.
113 Calvin, Comm. Amos 1:2 From CTS.
The prophecy that Amos declares over kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the litany of nations is one of woe and condemnation—no one escapes, for all have committed acts of violence, oppression, and rebellion against the true God. Calvin observes that the heart of the prophecy is this:

[Amos] wished here to set before the eyes of the Israelites the punishment of others to awaken them, and also to induce them to examine themselves for we often see, that those who are intractable and refractory in their disposition, when directly addressed are not very attentive; but when they hear of the sins of others, and especially when they hear something of punishment, they will attend. The Prophet therefore designed by degrees to lead the Israelites to a teachable state of mind, for he knew them to be torpid in their indulgences, and also blinded by presumption, so that they could not be easily brought under the yoke: hence he sets before them the punishment which was soon to fall on neighboring nations.  

Similar to Calvin’s handling of the oracles described in Ezekiel 1 and the episode of Isaiah’s encounter with God in Isaiah 6, the prophecy is interpreted as primarily confronting the blindness, stupidity, and pride of the audience. It is not as if the prophet could simply deal with the societal immorality through reasoned debate or pursue justice for the poor and oppressed by negotiating the terms of Israel’s legal system. Rather, graphic imagery, implicating Israel, Judah, and their neighbors, had to be set in sharp relief—“set before their eyes”—in order for the severity of the impending judgment to be comprehended. It is, as Calvin says, “a sad spectacle, but yet useful,” though a spectacle nonetheless. The powerful imagery that Amos sets out thus serves to confront Israel’s blindness—but ultimately calling the people to renewed sight—as it pictures the impending judgment by God.

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114 Calvin, *Comm. Amos* 1:3–5 from CTS.
115 Calvin, *Comm. Amos* 1:6–8 from CTS.
2.4.5.2 Amos 4:2–3

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the LORD.

Calvin’s comments on this pericope draw on rich visual themes that move between the visibility and invisibility of the divine. Because the essence of divinity cannot be fully revealed in (or reduced to) human speech, God must confirm the revelation by appealing to something that the people can see and comprehend. Calvin treats the phrase “Juravit Dominus Jehova per sanctuarium suum” (4:2a) as God swearing by God’s “holy sanctuary,” as in a physical space. He explains:

It is singular that God should swear by his temple rather than by himself: and this seems strange; for the Lord is wont to swear by himself for this reason—because there is none greater by whom he can swear, as the Apostle says, (Hebrews 6:13) God then seems to transfer the honor due to himself to stones and wood; which appears by no means consistent. But the name of the temple amounts to the same thing as the name of God. God then says that he had sworn by the sanctuary, because he himself is invisible, and the temple was his ostensible image, by which he exhibited himself as visible: it was also a sign and symbol of religion, where the face of God shone forth. God did not then divest himself of his own glory, that he might adorn with it the temple; but he rather accommodated himself here to the rude state of men; for he could not in himself be known, but in a certain way appeared to them in the temple. Hence he swore by the temple.

This is a surprising exegetical move for Calvin, as one would expect an argument in the opposite direction—that the sanctuarium would be read as symbolic of God’s absolute holiness, such that God is not so much transferring divine authority to a constructed edifice as obliquely speaking in terms of self-reference—God swearing by Godself. However, Calvin allows that the temple, a physical structure, in Amos is presented as a temporal image of God. As he says, “the name of the temple amounts to the same thing

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116 Calvin, Comm. Amos 4:2 from CTS.
as the name of God” since “the temple was his ostensible image, by which he exhibited himself as visible.” God is made visible in the local space of the temple sanctuary, the Israelite place of worship, and the call Amos issues is for the kingdoms to abandon their shrines and places of relative safety in order to meet God there.

While in other places in the commentaries Calvin resorts to Christian doctrinal categories to interpret certain signs and symbols in the prophets (e.g., his sacramental explanation of the cleansing of the prophet’s tongue in Isaiah 6 that was noted above), he does not do so here. On the contrary, he allows the Hebrew temple imagery to stand on its own as a symbol of divine presence, albeit accommodated presence such as we have seen elsewhere. Calvin notes that the prophet is neither claiming that the temple somehow contains or circumscribes the totality of the divine presence nor is the prophet simply remarking on the temple as an afterthought. Rather, Amos’s claim that God’s presence resides in the temple sanctuary serves to confront the idolatrous worship that is said to be taking place throughout Israel and Judah at the counterfeit temples setup by Jeroboam.117 As Calvin explains, noting the novelty of his insight here, “by swearing by his sanctuary, [God] repudiated all the fictitious forms of worship in which the Israelites glorified,” and so “a contrast [is drawn] between the sanctuary, where the Jews rightly and legitimately worshipped God, and the spurious temples which Jeroboam built, and also the high places where the Israelites imagined that they worshipped him.” In other words, the temple as living image of God stands against the dead images of the local heathen shrines.

To sum up, Calvin’s commentary on these oracles of Amos presents a distinctive perspective on his understanding of God’s visual manifestation to the prophets. First, he

117 See Calvin, Comm. Amos 1:2 from CTS.
prioritizes the visual in his explanation of the prophet’s call, saying that the revelation received was not simply aural but ocular. Amos saw the words concerning the divine revelation, which served to confirm his prophetic status. Second, while in other places in his theological corpus Calvin is keen to emphasize the essential invisibility of God—underscoring the qualitative difference between the visible and invisible, the created and the uncreated—here he is willing to associate the presence of God with a tangible, local object, the temple sanctuary. He even goes so far as to say that the object became God’s “ostensible image” and “a sign and symbol of religion, where the face of God shone forth.” In short, his comments on Amos serve to amplify the positive place of the visual in his theology.

2.4.6 Seeing God in the Theophany of Nahum (Na 1:3–5)

The Lord is slow to anger but great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.

His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither, and the bloom of Lebanon fades.

The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it.

Drawing on elements of the Exodus cycle (i.e., the Hebrew people’s passage on dry land out of Egypt) and the well-known prophetic themes of divine wrath coupled with mercy, this oracle of Nahum presents a theophany in which the appearance of God is manifest through natural disaster. The prophecy is an extended meditation on the military defeat of the Assyrians, drawing on the imagery of God as warrior and cloud-rider.
When placed among the prophets, Calvin notes, Nahum presents a stark and atypical vision of the divine appearance; one characterized by “horrible terror” and “dreadful darkness” rather than by beauty, glory, and grace, such as is found in Isaiah and Ezekiel. The language of God existing in the whirlwind recalls the words of the psalmist in Psalm 18, which is a similar meditation on the brightness and beauty of God being cloaked in clouds and darkness that, in turn, send out hailstones and fiery coals of destruction. Calvin explains that Nahum utilizes this natural imagery in a way similar to that of the psalmist—to evoke a sense of terror at the divine judgment: “hence [the prophet] says, ‘The way of God is in the whirlwind and tempest’; that is, when God goes forth, whirlwinds and tempests are excited by his presence, and the whole world is put in confusion.” Similarly, the imagery of the dust rising from the earth and the clouds gathering in the heavens suggest that the judgment of God cannot be localized to a single place, but extends over all creation. Calvin invokes a familiar theme in his closing comments on the passage, namely that of the created world mirroring the beauty and terror of God. “Though the earth be wonderfully ornamented and replenished,” he writes, “yet all things will be reduced to solitude and desolation whenever God is angry…for we see what would immediately be as soon as God manifests signals of his judgment.”

The theophany described in Nahum relies on a grand and terrible picture of divine judgment mediated through a diversity of created phenomena. Calvin follows the grain of the prophet’s words, connecting them to other pieces of the Hebrew writings, which speak to the presence and judgment of God being associated with and manifest in natural events. Moreover, without harmonizing the texts, Calvin allows the dreadful vision

118 Calvin, Comm. Nahum 1:3 from CTS.
119 Calvin, Comm. Nahum 1:3 from CTS.
120 Calvin, Comm. Nahum, 1:4–5 from CTS.
captured in Nahum to stand alongside those visions that describe God as being garbed in beauty and brightness.

While Calvin celebrates the graphic nature of the oracles narrated in the prophets—highlighting the indispensability of vision in confirming their teaching authority, as well as the place of visual revelation in presenting pictures of mercy and judgment appropriate to the faculties and sensibilities of the people—Calvin is clear that a more distinct vision of God is to come. This vision is granted in the apostolic witness to the image of God in Jesus Christ. It is to these texts that we now turn.

2.4.7 ‘And their eyes were opened...’ (Lk 24:13–32)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to
each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

This passage from Luke’s gospel (along with its parallel, Mk 16:12) is the recapitulation of the Passover meal described in Luke 22. Citing the authority of Augustine, as well as that of the broader patristic tradition, Calvin calls the episode a “mirror of the Lord’s Supper” for those who “beheld [Jesus] with bodily eyes.”

However, when the disciples first encounter the risen Christ, it is said, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Lk 24:16). Calvin takes this as evidence that Christ’s body remained identical to what it was before crucifixion and resurrection, such that the body the disciples encountered on their way to Emmaus was not an apparition or disembodied spirit, but truly flesh and blood. Calvin writes:

The Evangelist expressly states this, lest any one should think that the aspect of Christ’s body was changed, and that the features of his countenance were different from what they had formerly been (et qu’il y eut autres traits de visage qu’auparavant). For though Christ remained like himself, he was not recognized, because the eyes of beholders were held; and this takes away all suspicion of a phantom or false imagination. But hence we learn how great is the weakness of all our senses, since neither eyes nor ears discharge their office, unless so far as power is incessantly communicated to them from heaven. Our members do indeed possess their natural properties; but to make us more fully sensible that they are held by us at the will of another, God retains in his own hand the use of them, so that we ought ever to reckon it to be one of his daily favors, that our ears hear and our eyes see; for if he does not every hour quicken our senses, all their power will immediately give way.

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121 Calvin, Comm. Harmony of the Gospels, Luke 24:30 from CTS. Calvin notes that “Augustine, and the greater part of other commentators along with him, have thought that Christ gave the bread, not as an ordinary meal, but as the sacred symbol of his body. And, indeed, it might be said with some plausibility, that the Lord was at length recognized in the spiritual mirror of the Lord’s Supper; for the disciples did not know him, when they beheld him with the bodily eyes. But as this conjecture rests on no probable grounds, I choose rather to view the words of Luke as meaning that Christ, in taking the bread, gave thanks according to his custom. But it appears that he employed his peculiar and ordinary form of prayer, to which he knew that the disciples had been habitually accustomed, that, warned by this sign, they might arouse their senses. In the meantime, let us learn by the example of our Master, whenever we eat bread, to offer thanksgiving to the Author of life—an action which will distinguish us from irreligious men.” Calvin, Comm. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Luke 24:16 from CTS.

Calvin goes onto treat this encounter between the disciples and Christ’s risen physical body as a microcosm of humanity’s general encounter with creation. As Calvin contends elsewhere, in their original state, the sense faculties, especially that of the bodily eye, were endowed with the ability to behold the power of God throughout creation; however, “in this wretched corruption, after having been deprived of their light, they are liable to innumerable deceptions, and are sunk into such gross stupidity, that they can do nothing but commit mistakes, as happens to us incessantly.” Accordingly, the problem of the corruption of the senses can only be remedied by the action of God. “The proper discrimination between truth and falsehood,” Calvin writes, “does not arise from the sagacity of our own mind, but comes to us from the Spirit of wisdom. But it is chiefly in the contemplation of heavenly things that our stupidity is discovered; for not only do we imagine false appearances to be true, but we turn the clear light into darkness.” From this Emmaus encounter and the disciples’ failure to properly perceive the body of the risen Lord, Calvin extrapolates the broader principle that the capacities of our senses are so injured that the activity of God is required in order that we may rightly perceive the power of divinity throughout creation.

When Calvin turns to consider the conversation between the disciples and Christ (vv. 25–27), he roots the veracity of Christ’s teaching in the covenant displayed in the Mosaic Law and sayings of the prophets. Christ does not teach them, Calvin notes, according to his own testimony, but according to that of the older dispensation in order to demonstrate the continuity between his ministry and that teaching and ministry that came before him. He writes, “In order that Christ may be made known to us through the

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Gospel, it is therefore necessary that Moses and the Prophets should go before us as
guides, to show us the way. It is necessary to remind readers of this, that they may not
lend an ear to fanatics, who, by suppressing the Law and the Prophets, wickedly mutilate
the Gospel; as if God intended that any testimony which he has ever given respecting his
Son should become useless.” 125 This brings into view one of Calvin’s favorite tropes, that
of the type and shadow nature of the rites and ceremonies of the old covenant, which
witnessed to the coming Messiah. According to Calvin, the gospel writer demonstrates
that “the visible ceremonies of the law are shadows of spiritual things, [and] he shows
that in the whole of the legal priesthood, in the sacrifices, and in the form of the
sanctuary, we ought to seek Christ.” When Jesus presents the continuity between the
Mosaic Law and Hebrew religious ceremonies and his own suffering and death “the full
revelation of the Son” is made manifest. 126 In Christ, the disciples gaze upon the Mediator
of the covenant, who displays in his body the substance of things that were hoped for in
the Hebrew dispensation. 127

Extending the argument that no ontological transformation (“metamorphosis”)128
took place with Christ’s body, but in its pre- and post-resurrection states remained the
selfsame thing, 129 when the eyes of the disciples were finally opened, it was on account of

127 “From the Law, therefore, we may properly learn Christ, if we consider that the covenant which God
made with the fathers was founded on the Mediator; that the sanctuary, by which God manifested the
presence of his grace, was consecrated by his blood; that the Law itself, with its promises, was sanctioned
by the shedding of blood; that a single priest was chosen out of the whole people, to appear in the presence
of God, in the name of all, not as an ordinary mortal, but clothed in sacred garments; and that no hope of
reconciliation with God was held out to men but through the offering of sacrifice.” Calvin, Comm.
129 Based on his comments here, it is unclear whether Calvin thinks there is a qualitative difference between
Christ’s pre- and post-resurrection body. On the one hand, as noted, he is unequivocal that no ontological
transformation took place—the body of the crucified Christ is identical with that of the resurrected Christ.
On the other hand, Calvin emphasizes that the disciples did not recognize Jesus due to their own weakness.
the revelation of God. The identity of Christ was revealed, not because of the perceptive powers of the mortal eyes that gazed upon the resurrected flesh, but due to “the secret and hidden grace of the Spirit [that was] bestowed upon them.” At the moment of their initial encounter, “the eyes of the beholders were mistaken, because they were covered,” but as soon as clarity of vision came, “he vanished from the eyes of those very persons, not because his body was in itself invisible, but because God, by withdrawing their rigor, blunted their acuteness.” This departure, the withdrawing of the body, happened, Calvin argues, so that the disciples would not indulge in their “natural addiction to the earth,” but contemplate the source of new life handed down from God. Thus Calvin says that the power of God manifest in Christ’s body, which the disciples on first glance failed to perceive, is God’s omnipotence over nature, a theme that is extended and deepened in Calvin’s reflection on Romans 1.

2.4.8 Beholding God in Paul’s the Letter to the Romans

2.4.8.1 Romans 1:18–22

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew*

There could be two explanations for this latter emphasis in his comments, neither of which Calvin affirms with any clarity: (1) The disciples’ failure to recognize Jesus could be on account of the weakness (or absence) of faith—they simply failed to believe that a dead body could be raised again in the manner Jesus described, and therefore they did not recognize Jesus. In other words, the man they encountered might have looked like the Jesus they knew but it couldn’t possibly have been him given that he had died and was buried. (2) The disciples simply did not recognize Jesus because of the nature of Jesus’s resurrected flesh. Their eyes, which belonged to the old dispensation of death, could not fully ‘see’ or comprehend the new life that was before them. Again, Calvin does not fully explain why the disciples did not recognize Jesus, but only stresses that their vision was inherently weak, and that there is ontological continuity between Christ’s pre- and post-resurrection body (perhaps as an oblique polemic against the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, though he does not say this).


God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

In these notorious words from Paul’s letter to the Romans, controversial not least because of Barth and Brunner’s contest over the passage, we get a continuation of issues presented in Luke 24, namely the question of dynamic between the visibility and invisibility of God as manifest in and through created structures. Whereas his treatment of Luke 24 includes an extended argument on the material continuity (and integrity) of Christ’s pre- and post-resurrection body—and, extending from this, an argument regarding the ability of this body to manifest the power of divinity to bodily eyes endowed by the Spirit with the ability to perceive—in his commentary on this passage, Calvin moves to more general reflections on the world’s endowment with the ability to manifest God. Calvin begins his commentary by observing that the order and beauty of the world ought to incite rightly oriented worship on the part of humanity. However, rather than perform such worship, which would mean perceiving creation in right relation with its source and end, God, humanity has descended into blind sacrilege and “wicked and abominable ingratitude.” We observe that Calvin, in his initial comments on the passage, thinks Paul is here speaking to the problem of disoriented worship rather than the question of the knowledge of God being readily available in the natural world prior to and apart from revelation.

The glory of God manifest in creation precedes the human ability to perceive the divine glory. As Calvin puts it, “By saying, that ‘God has made it manifest,’ [Paul]

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133 Calvin, *Comm. Romans* 1:18 from CTS.
means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were
given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author
himself.” The creation, then, functions like a beam of light that lifts the eyes to God,
such that when the bodily eye rests on creation, it ought not stop there, but be led higher
to the source. Calvin contends that though “God is invisible in himself,” nevertheless “his
majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere,” thus “they clearly set
forth their Maker.” In short, “this world is a mirror, or the representation of invisible
things.” In the expansive intricacy of the created world and through diversity of its
parts, the beauty of the invisible God is available to be seen.

Thus there is continuity between creation and God that is not ontological but
visual, and so God and creation remain ontologically distinct while serving as the
condition of the possibility of knowledge of the other. Calvin contends that the works of
God spread throughout creation, as well as the beauty of created bodies that are
microcosms of creation itself, stand as witnesses, mirrors as he says, that testify to the
beauty of their creator. It is when the eyes rest on created things, treating them as
beautiful or harmonious in themselves, that the error of idolatry ensues. As Calvin
remarks on verses 21–22:

For there is no one who is not indebted to [God] for numberless benefits: yea, even on this account alone, because he has been pleased to reveal himself to us, he has abundantly made us indebted to him. ‘But they became vain,’ etc.; that is, having forsaken the truth of God, they turned to the vanity of their own reason, all the acuteness of which is fading and passes away like vapor. And thus their foolish mind, being involved in darkness, could understand nothing aright but was carried away headlong, in various ways, into errors and delusions. Their unrighteousness was

134 Calvin, Comm. Romans 1:19 from CTS.
135 Calvin, Comm. Romans 1:20 from CTS.
...they quickly choked by their own depravity the seed of right knowledge, before it grew up to ripeness.\textsuperscript{136}

This is where knowledge of God and rightly ordered worship meet. For Calvin, creation does not directly testify to itself but serves to bind humanity to God by leading humanity to contemplate the nature of the Artificer. This contemplation, or union through beholding the divine works, is the point and goal of revelation. To be clear, this knowledge, for Calvin, is not an end in itself, but must take the form of rightly ordered worship—that is, an ordered orientation of humanity to God that includes the full scope of our creative use of material creation to unfold a sense of creation’s own sanctity and fragile contingency that culminates in praise to the one who creates, sustains, and redeems. Because the seed of worship has been suppressed, or “choked out,” by human sin, the human must be reoriented to God. As we saw in Calvin’s comments on Luke 24, this has been given in the flesh of Jesus Christ, which raises the created gaze to behold God’s glory in the place where Christ is. Christ’s risen body thus becomes the antidote to the images of God conjured by what Calvin characterizes as “vain imagination.”\textsuperscript{137}

\textbf{2.4.8.2 Romans 2:28–29}

\textit{For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.}

Calvin’s commentary on this pericope chiefly deals with the connection between the rite of circumcision and the covenantal membership and spiritual renewal it served to symbolize. He aligns the outward cutting of the flesh with the letter of the law that is

\textsuperscript{136} Calvin, \textit{Comm. Romans} 1:21 from CTS.
\textsuperscript{137} Calvin, \textit{Comm. Romans} 1:22 from CTS.
dead unless the enlivening Spirit manifests the ceremony’s “spiritual design,” the promise of incorporation into the living covenant.138 But how is the Spirit to be discerned in the letter of the law? How does one come to comprehend the inner “spiritual design” by observing the outward ceremony? Calvin answers by employing a visual metaphor, contending that Paul intends to deny that one can simply benefit from seeing the rite visually displayed, much like Paul’s famous argument that simply following the letter of the law will lead to condemnation.139 “As men fix their eyes only on those things which are visible,” Calvin writes, “[Paul] denies that we ought to be satisfied with what is commendable in the estimation of men, who are often deceived by outward splendor; but that we ought to be satisfied with the all-seeing eyes of God, from which the deepest secrets of the heart are not hid.”140 In other words, in the performance of the rite, one must see beyond the letter to behold the promise of God externalized in it.141 If one allows the gaze merely to be satisfied with the “bare sign” of the rite, then they do not properly comprehend the sign—neither in terms of its purpose nor its content. If, on the other

138 Calvin, Comm. Romans, 2:29 from CTS.
139 In his comments on Rom 7:9, Calvin spells out this point. He writes, “It may be asked, what time was that when through [Paul’s] ignorance of the law, or as he himself says, through the absence of it, he confidently laid claim to life. It is indeed certain, that he had been taught the doctrine of the law from his childhood; but it was the theology of the letter, which does not humble its disciples, for as he says elsewhere, the veil interposed so that the Jews could not see the light of life in the law; so also he himself, while he had his eyes veiled, being destitute of the Spirit of Christ, was satisfied with the outward mask of righteousness. Hence he represents the law as absent, though before his eyes, while it did not really impress him with the consciousness of God’s judgment. Thus the eyes of hypocrites are covered with a veil, that they see not how much that command requires, in which we are forbidden to lust or covet.” Calvin, Comm. Romans 7:9 from CTS.
140 Calvin, Comm. Romans 2:29 from CTS.
141 Commenting on Rom 6:4 (“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life”), Calvin extends this point: “For when we glory that God is ours, whatever blessings can be imagined or wished, ensue and flow from this fountain; for God is not only the chief of all good things, but also possesses in himself the sum and substance of all blessings; and he becomes ours through Christ. We then attain this by faith—that nothing is wanting to us as to happiness. Nor is it in vain that he so often mentions reconciliation: it is, first, that we may be taught to fix our eyes on the death of Christ, whenever we speak of our salvation; and, secondly, that we may know that our trust must be fixed on nothing else, but on the expiation made for our sins.” Calvin, Comm. Romans 6:4 from CTS.
hand, the eyes are led up to God, who sees all things in their totality, then faith has performed its proper function, which is that of beholding God who grants spiritual insight through the visible form.

2.4.8.3 Romans 5:1–2

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

Calvin observes that the content of faith is Christ himself, such that when faith looks in hope to God, it seeks the risen Messiah as its foundation and end. In his comments on Romans 5:1–2, Calvin commends Paul’s words, saying: “Rightly then does Paul set before our eyes in Christ a sure pledge of God’s favor, that he might more easily draw us away from every confidence in works.”

Remarkably, Calvin ties this passage to 2 Peter 1:4 and 1 John 3:2, suggesting that faith actively pursues the very face of God as revealed in the glorified Christ. Jesus Christ is, then, the telos of vision, as well as the content of the *visio Dei* that the eyes of faith seek: “The hope of the glory of God has shone upon us through the gospel, which testifies that we shall be participators of the Divine nature; for when we shall see God face to face, we shall be like him.”

According to Calvin, the face-to-face vision of God is the goal of faith and the summary of the gospel. The promise that humanity will behold God with unveiled face is the point of the good news the apostolic heralds are charged with. Therefore, in beholding the risen and glorified body of Jesus Christ, bodily sight (i.e., the vision of the bodily eye) and spiritual insight (i.e., the vision of the soul) are brought into dynamic union with one

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142 Calvin, *Comm. Romans* 5:2 from CTS.
143 Calvin, *Comm. Romans* 5:2 from CTS.
another. Through this vision, an exchange takes place—the faithful will be made like
God, transformed into the very thing they contemplate in love, in the moment of the full
beholding of the divine face.¹⁴⁴

2.4.9 Beholding God in the Corinthian Letters

2.4.9.1 2 Corinthians 4:1–6

Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose
heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice
cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend
ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is
veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has
blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of
the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we
proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the
God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the
light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Calvin’s exegesis of this pericope presents his most focused statement on the
priority of Christ in mediating the vision of God. Indeed, when he examines Paul’s
teaching in 2 Corinthians 4, he makes the case that the visio Dei is the visio Christi, a
point that is unfolded in greater detail throughout his eucharistic tracts and treatises.¹⁴⁵ In
addition to his remarks on Christ as the summary of the visio Dei, Calvin takes up the
visual theme of the dynamics of blindness and sight. These themes feature prominently in
this passage as the apostle describes the perils of his teaching ministry in his
rationalization as to why some rejected the gospel handed down to him from Christ.

¹⁴⁴ Calvin’s comments on Rom 5:11 are apropos to the present discussion: “For when we glory that God is
ours, whatever blessings can be imagined or wished, ensue and flow from this fountain; for God is not only
the chief of all good things, but also possesses in himself the sum and substance of all blessings; and he
becomes ours through Christ. We then attain this by faith—that nothing is wanting to us as to happiness.
Nor is it in vain that he so often mentions reconciliation: it is, first, that we may be taught to fix our eyes on
the death of Christ, whenever we speak of our salvation; and, secondly, that we may know that our trust
must be fixed on nothing else, but on the expiation made for our sins.” Calvin, Comm. Romans 5:11 from
CTS.
¹⁴⁵ See section 3.3 below.
In Paul’s defense of his apostolic ministry, he contends that those who have rejected the gospel have done so due to a blinding force that comes from without (which resonates with Paul’s own experience with literal bodily blinding on the road to Damascus). The subject of this action is left largely anonymous, or at least ambiguous, though Calvin suggests that “the god of this world,” who is said to have blinded the eyes of many, is to be understood as Satan, the adversary of God. Resisting a Manichean line of interpretation that would suggest Satan, as ruler over a domain of evil, has command over a kingdom that is locked in cosmic conflict with that of the true God, Calvin contends this satanic blinding ultimately serves the divine purposes without overcoming them. He argues: “Devils, no less than the angels of heaven, are servants of God, each of them severally in his own manner. For, as the latter dispense to us God’s benefits, so the former execute his wrath.”  

Calvin’s attribution of malevolent activity to the demons contrasts with his exegesis of Romans 1, where he attributed human blindness and spiritual error to natural injury borne out of humanity’s own rebellion against God. In his reading of 2 Corinthians 4, however, blindness to the gospel is said to be “a work common to God and to Satan, for it is in many instances ascribed to God; but the power is not alike, nor is the manner the same.”

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146 Calvin, *Comm. 2 Corinthians* 4:4 from CTS.
147 Calvin, *Comm. 2 Corinthians* 4:4 from CTS.
same.”\textsuperscript{148} Despite the fact that Calvin allows for satanic blinding to occur within certain boundaries set by God (e.g., Calvin references the narrative of Job here), in the end he prioritizes the activity of God in this complex, arguing that spiritual blindness, which is an inability to ‘see’ the revelation of God broadcast in creation, regardless of the cause, should be read as an act of divine judgment, just as the gift of sight should be read as an act of divine grace.

When Calvin turns to consider the connection between “the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ” and the apostle’s statement on Christ as “image of God,” he takes up two issues. The first has to do with the visibility of God the Father through God the Son; the second concerns the related matter of who is actually seen and what is actually encountered in the revelation of the second person of the Trinity. Dealing with the doctrinal implications of verses 4–5 for questions regarding the unity of the divine essence, Calvin seeks to preserve the inherent invisibility of the first person of the Trinity. In Calvin’s mind, if the passage were read as speaking, in the strict sense, to the essential unity between Father and Son (i.e., Christ “co-essential of the Father”),\textsuperscript{149} then the Father would no longer be invisible but visible, and thus fully subject to creaturely sense. However, rather than have the statement “Christ, who is the image of God” indicate that God the Father has become utterly visible in Jesus Christ, Calvin claims the statement is speaking to Christ’s representation of God to humanity. He explains, “The Father himself is represented as invisible, because he is in himself not apprehended by the human understanding. He exhibits himself, however, by his Son, and makes himself visible…. [Christ] is the image of God to us, when he manifests to us what had otherwise

\textsuperscript{148} Calvin, \textit{Comm. 2 Corinthians} 4:4 from CTS.
\textsuperscript{149} See Calvin, \textit{Comm. 2 Corinthians} 4:4 from CTS.
been hid in him.”

Christ as *imago Dei*, therefore, does not disclose the divine essence, but is offered as a representation, or true likeness, of God the Father without being identical to the Father. We note the similarities here with Calvin’s account of creation’s reflective and representative capacities.

On the issue of what is actually exhibited in the revelation of Jesus Christ, Calvin offers a fourfold explanation of verse 6, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” First, the light that emanates from the gospel lays open human nature as inherently obscure and mysterious in itself and to itself. The light of Christ, therefore, makes the human perceptible to herself by showing that her proper source and end is found from without, in life with God. Second, this light illuminates the law and ceremonies of the old covenant, showing them to be not ends in themselves but witnesses to the good news to come in God’s appointed Messiah. Third, following the exegesis of Ambrose, Calvin says that the light reveals not only that human nature was cloaked in darkness, but that all things existed under the shadow of sin, and thus groaned for emancipation from the pall of the shadow. Indeed, this liberation has come in the manifestation of the Christ in the body, whose work set creation free from the bondage of death. Fourth, following Chrysostom and the logic of the first chapter of John’s gospel, Calvin suggests the “God, who by his word created light, drawing it, as it were, out of the darkness—that same Being has now enlightened us in a spiritual manner, when we were

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150 Calvin, *Comm. 2 Corinthians* 4:4 from CTS.
151 As Edmondson comments, “Calvin does not speak of Christ revealing God in God’s essence. The divine nature is inscrutable even in the incarnation. Rather, in and through his threefold office, Christ reveals God’s merciful will through his accomplishment of that will in his history. Through Christ’s history the invisible God has become visible among us, accommodating Godself to our weakness. Through his history God’s mercy has touched us so that we might turn and know and embrace God as Father.” Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 180.
buried in darkness.”  In other words, the Creator and the Redeemer are one and the same.  

This fourfold explanation 2 Corinthians 4:6 culminates in a meditation on the visual self-disclosure of God the Creator in the person of the Redeemer, God the Son. Calvin writes:

For as God, the Creator of the world, pours forth upon us the brightness of the sun, and gives us eyes to receive it, so, as the Redeemer, in the person of his Son, He shines forth, indeed, upon us by His gospel, but, as we are blind, that would be in vain, if He did not at the same time enlighten our understandings by His Spirit. His meaning, therefore, is, that God has, by His Spirit, opened the eyes of our understandings, so as to make them capable of receiving the light of the gospel.

Though the apostle does not explicitly mention the Spirit, Calvin nevertheless draws on a Trinitarian dynamic in order to explain how it is that the eyes of faith are opened to the revelation of God in Christ’s gospel. It is indeed Christ, says Calvin, who “shines forth…upon us by His gospel,” but as one without sight can only feel the warmth of the sun but not behold its light, so the darkened eye of faith may detect something of God in an encounter with Christ, but not properly perceive the full breadth of the revelation. Thus, the Spirit must work to “open the eyes of our understanding” so that the eye can behold “the glory of God…manifested to us in Christ’s face.” Calvin therefore commends looking to Christ, who presents us with the face-to-face vision of God. “True, indeed,” says Calvin, “God in Christ appears in the first instance to be mean, but he appears at length to be glorious in the view of those, who hold on, so as to come from the cross to the resurrection. Again we see, that in the word person (prosōpon) there is a

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152 Calvin, Comm. 2 Corinthians 4:6 from CTS.
153 See Edmondson’s discussion of the two modalities of theological knowledge in Calvin, God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Edmondson, Calvin’s Christology, 178–81.
154 Calvin, Comm. 2 Corinthians 4:6 from CTS.
155 Calvin, Comm. 2 Corinthians 4:6 from CTS.
reference made to us, because it is more advantageous for us to behold God, as He appears in His only-begotten Son, than to search out His secret essence.”156 Thus knowledge of God, according to Calvin in these reflections on 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, is a kind of visual Trinitarian poetics. What Calvin is saying is that to know God is to behold God in the face of the Son as a result of the Spirit’s work in healing the blindness of the eyes, which enables us to see by revelation that God has made Godself fully known in Christ’s face.157

2.4.9.2 2 Corinthians 5:5–8

_He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee._

_So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord._

As we have seen, according to Calvin, the goal towards which faith strives is life with God summarized in the face-to-face encounter with the divine glory in the image of Jesus Christ. Continuing this line of thought, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:5–8, Calvin unfolds the import of the enigmatic phrase, “we walk by faith, not by sight”

156 Calvin, _Comm. 2 Corinthians 4:6_ from CTS.
157 The logic of this summary statement is unpacked in Calvin’s formal description of faith in the _Institutes_: “Paul…declares, that in the person of Christ the glory of God is visibly manifested to us, or, which is the same thing, we have ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ It is true, indeed, that faith has respect to God only; but to this we should add, that it acknowledges Jesus Christ whom he has sent. God would remain far off, concealed from us, were we not irradiated by the brightness of Christ. All that the Father had, he deposited with his only begotten Son, in order that he might manifest himself in him, and thus by the communication of blessings express the true image of his glory. Since, as has been said, we must be led by the Spirit, and thus stimulated to seek Christ, so must we also remember that the invisible Father is to be sought nowhere but in this image. For which reason Augustine treating of the object of faith, elegantly says, ‘The thing to be known is, whither we are to go, and by what way,’ and immediately after infers, that ‘the surest way to avoid all errors is to know him who is both God and man. It is to God we tend, and it is by man we go, and both of these are found only in Christ.’ Paul, when he preaches faith towards God, surely does not intend to overthrow what he so often inculcates—viz. that faith has all its stability in Christ. Peter most appropriately connects both, saying, that by him “we believe in God.”” Calvin, _Institutes: 1559 Latin_, 3.2.1.
(5:7b), attending to the question of how it is that the faithful can walk with God without seeing God. Calvin remarks that those to whom God is present “by the energy of his Spirit” are those who reside in God’s midst because divinity resides in them. These are the ones who presently navigate the present world by faith.

However, the Spirit, like the Father, is an invisible reality, one on which the bodily eye cannot rest. Thus while on pilgrimage in the earthly body, the faithful are said to be absent from God. Paradoxically, God is present to those who walk in faith by the movement of the Spirit, but the faithful are not present to God because they do not yet see God, for they are still journeying towards that final vision. We might say that they are not absent in an absolute sense but in the sense that the journey of faith has not reached its ultimate destination. As Calvin explains:

[God] is present with his believing people by the energy of his Spirit; he lives in them, resides in the midst of them, nay more, within them. But in the mean time he is absent from us, inasmuch as he does not present himself to be seen face to face, because we are as yet in a state of exile from his kingdom, and have not as yet attained that blessed immortality, which the angels that are with him enjoy. At the same time, to be absent, in this passage, refers merely to knowledge, as is manifest from the reason that is afterwards added.\footnote{Calvin, Comm. 2 Corinthians 5:6 from CTS.}

But why does the apostle claim that the faithful are “absent” from God even with the accompanying presence of God’s Spirit? It is “because we do not yet see [God] face to face,” says Calvin, for “the manner of that absence is this—that God is not openly beheld by us,” thus “we have not as yet the privilege of sight, so long as we walk by faith. For we see, indeed, but it is ‘through a glass, darkly’; that is, in place of the reality we rest upon the word.”\footnote{Calvin, Comm. 2 Corinthians 5:7 from CTS.} In other words, the vision of God is the goal of faith, and so in the
interim faith must be nourished by the word mediated by the Spirit until this vision of God is granted. These reflections are continued in Calvin’s exegesis of Hebrews 11:1–3.

2.4.10 Beholding God in the Sermon to the Hebrews (Heb 11:1–3)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Acknowledging that Hebrews 11 presents a meditation on the nature of faith grounded in the Abrahamic covenant, Calvin contends that the teaching offered here is not concerned with the life of faith in toto, but only in terms of a single part, the moment when God’s good future appears far off. Accordingly, he calls attention to the fact that author to the Hebrews calls faith “the substance (hypostasis) of things hoped (spēranda) for,” which is to say that “what we hope for is not what we have as if it were in hand, but what is as yet hid from us, or at least the enjoyment of which is delayed to another time.”160 Therefore, faith as “the substance (or assurance) of things hoped for” is the “prop, or the foundation on which we plant our foot” as we await the unveiling of those things that are presently “absent” and “beyond the reach of our understanding,” which is to say things hidden from present life in the life of God.161 Faith, then, is certain in those things that are presently far off and concealed in God’s good future, such that, as Calvin comments elsewhere, “the knowledge of faith consists more in certainty than in comprehension (fidei notitiam certitudine magis quam apprehension contineri).”162 As Dowey characterizes it, this ‘certainty’ (certitudine) in things hoped for is not, for Calvin,

160 Calvin, Comm. Hebrews 11:1 from CTS.
161 Calvin, Comm. Hebrews 11:1 from CTS.
a-rational or irrational, but supra-rational, a divine gift that extends beyond natural understanding.  

Calvin believes this reading of Hebrews 11:1 is clarified and confirmed by Hebrews 11:3, which says that “through faith we understand the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do not appear.” Rendering the second clause more literally as, “So that they became the visible of things not visible,” Calvin comments, “we have in this visible world, a conspicuous image of God.” Connecting these comments to Romans 1:20, he continues: “the invisible things of God are made known to us by the creation of the world, they being seen in his works. God has given us, throughout the whole framework of this world, clear evidences of his eternal wisdom, goodness, and power; and though he is in himself invisible, he in a manner becomes visible to us in his works.” The bodily eye, therefore, can gaze upon the material world, which bears the marks of divine activity that manifest a true (though ultimately incomplete) picture of the nature of divinity. As we have seen, this visual encounter with God in creation is brought into sharper focus in the revelation of the Son, the one Mediator between God and world. For a succinct statement on this, we turn to the Institutes:

In the person of Christ the glory of God is visibly manifested to us, or, which is the same thing, we have “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” It is true, indeed, that faith has respect to God only; but to this we should add, that it acknowledges Jesus Christ whom he has sent. God would remain far off, concealed from us, were we not irradiated by the brightness of Christ. All that the Father had, he deposited with his only begotten Son, in order that he might manifest himself in him, and thus by the communication of blessings express the true image of his glory. Since, as has been said, we must be led by the Spirit, and thus stimulated to seek Christ, so must we also remember that

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163 Dowey, Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology, 184.
164 Calvin, Comm. Hebrews 11:3 from CTS.
the invisible Father is to be sought nowhere but in this image. For which reason Augustine treating of the object of faith, elegantly says, “The thing to be known is, whither we are to go, and by what way;” and immediately after infers, that “the surest way to avoid all errors is to know him who is both God and man. It is to God we tend, and it is by man we go, and both of these are found only in Christ.” Paul, when he preaches faith towards God, surely does not intend to overthrow what he so often inculcates—viz. that faith has all its stability in Christ. Peter most appropriately connects both, saying, that by him “we believe in God.”

In other words, the singular orientation of faith is to God, and this is what binds the hope of the prophets to the testimony of the apostles: both looked to God in faith. However, faith that falters by letting its gaze rest upon tangible things loses itself, for it neglects God in pursuit of material stability. And yet Calvin contends that faith, as the Spirit cultivates and fosters it prior to the consummation of all things, does not simply seek knowledge of God in an abstract sense. Rather, the Spirit cultivates and fosters a faith such that faith is enabled to look to Christ as “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.” Only when the eyes of faith rest on the face of Jesus Christ will it find “all its stability.” And so, for Calvin, in Christ is offered the vision of the invisible God in the accommodated form of a material body. It is in this light, that of Christ, that humanity is thus made able to see the light of the glory of God distributed throughout creation.

2.5 Conclusion

Vast with traces of extemporaneity, Calvin’s biblical commentaries afford the reader the opportunity to investigate a complex network of ideas that foundation his theological edifice. In keeping with the spirit of early modern humanism, Calvin embraced an approach to biblical interpretation that attempted to privilege the historical location of the original texts, while also treating them as living documents pertinent to the nurture of the
contemporary life of faith. His understanding of the accommodated character of divine revelation offered in the biblical witness was the basis for his self-understanding as an interpreter responsible for placing the grammar of faith in service of lived piety. To be sure, his theology of accommodation was bound up with a sense of God’s ongoing, progressive, and generous accommodating activity present in a range of sensuous forms—aural, tactile, and visual.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that present within Calvin’s biblical commentaries is a rich, if inchoate, theology of vision that has as its focal point the vision of God offered in God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ. Calvin understood Christ’s role in mediating the vision of God as a key for unlocking the content of the range of divine showings described throughout scripture. To the prophets, God revealed Godself in visual form for reasons specific to the historical location of Israel. God placed before the prophet’s eyes extraordinary images that were then translated to the people by the prophet. The prophet “saw the words of God” even as the people encountered the revelation of God in visual form. When explicating the oracles of the prophets, Calvin at times entertained the possibility of Christ’s presence in the oracles—remarking that what the prophet saw was something of the one who was to come as the absolute Mediator between God and world. However, such speculation was ultimately set aside as he attempted to stick with the grain of the biblical text by attending to the prophets’ place within the old covenantal dispensation. While, for Calvin, the visions of God that the prophets enjoyed were genuine encounters with the divine, the visions they were given were, in the end, incomplete and gestured beyond themselves to a fuller revelation to
come: the unveiling of God in the Messiah to which the apostles, the prophets’ counterpart witness, testified.

Finally, we note that Calvin describes scripture itself in visual terms. He was fond of characterizing the biblical witness a kind of mirror, lens, or reflective device that sets God before the eyes of the faithful, illumining the range of iconic testimonies to the divine dispersed throughout creation. While the Bible is not identical with divine revelation—revelation derives from God alone and is not reducible to the text of scripture—the biblical witness nevertheless provides a focused picture of the nature of God that is orderly and clear. As he famously remarked in the Institutes: “Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.” The mirror of scripture is oriented towards the end of setting before our eyes a vision of God in Jesus Christ, who manifests a lucid image of the divine nature. To these broad concluding remarks, I add the following summary statements.

1. Taken as a whole, the words of the prophets and apostles disclose a diverse and complex set of convictions regarding the vision of God. Following the overarching framework of interpretation of this dissertation, I have shown that latent in Calvin’s analysis of the prophets and apostles is the detection of a movement between ‘seeing’ God in the books of the prophets and ‘beholding’ God in the form of the Messiah as found in the witness of the apostles. In Calvin’s approach to the prophetic oracles, God is truly seen but never fully comprehended, evidenced by the obscure and terrifying nature of the visions that often served to confront the spiritual blindness and hardness of heart of the people (as in the opening oracles of Ezekiel). Calvin attributes the visions recounted

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165 Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.6.1.
in prophets to the accommodating activity of God—divinity conforming itself to the capacities of the prophet so that the revelations could be transmitted to the people. If one were to summarize the heart of the matter in Calvin’s reading of the prophetic visions, it would be that these divine showings were given to demonstrate God’s nearness to God’s people in times of trial, calamity, and unfaithfulness. The divine condescension demonstrated in these prophetic oracles anticipated the fuller revelation to come, when God’s Messiah would be openly beheld.

2. Calvin’s reflections on the visions of God recounted in books of the prophets were filled out and extended in his explanation of the vision of God in the apostolic testimony, which bears witness to the face-to-face encounter with God in Christ. Though in both the cases Calvin is clear that God was accommodating Godself to human capacities through visual medium, it is the unveiling of the divine glory in the face of Christ that faith finds its proper foundation and end. Whereas the prophets truly saw God, the apostles openly beheld God, and both according to human capacity. The descent of divinity in the form of Jesus Christ was for the purpose of raising the created gaze to God. Rather than search out the inscrutable divine essence, faith, says Calvin, is content to gaze upon the fullness of God offered in Jesus Christ, who illumines all things.

3. We can say that the true *imago Dei*, for Calvin, is the *imago Christi*, the image that visibly manifests the glory of God in the world. By pursuing this idea, derived from Pauline theology, Calvin can reason that the hope of the world is summarized in the wounded and glorified flesh of Christ that rests at the right hand of God the Father. Through the activity of the Spirit, humanity is enabled to see that the world’s suffering is not futile, but has been comprehended and overcome in Christ’s cross, resurrection, and
present glorification that signals the world’s freedom from death. As humanity is still in a state of pilgrimage, Calvin stresses that faith is the means by which this reality is glimpsed. It is in this sense that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” as the minister to the Hebrews maintained. Faith, enlivened and sustained by the Spirit, is the means by which humanity comes to behold those living images of God in the visible world that are irradiated by the glorious image of Christ, who discloses the paternal care and sustaining power of the God to seekers on their way.
Chapter Three

Illuminating the Eyes of Faith:

Vision in Calvin’s Sacramental Theology

If we cannot yet see the Word as God, Let us listen to the Word as flesh.
Augustine, Sermon 117.16

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the role of vision in Calvin’s sacramental doctrine as it developed between the years of 1536 and 1561. In what follows I trace how accommodation, contemplation, and the visibility of divine grace meet one another in a variety of ways in Calvin’s sacramental theology. My thesis is that his doctrine of the sacraments begins to reconcile binary elements that, on the surface, appear to stand in conflict with one another. It is in his treatment of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in particular that Calvin places the transcendent and immanent, the material and immaterial, the soul and body, the spiritual and the earthly, and the visible and invisible into dynamic relation with one another. By bringing these elements together, he narrates how God’s descent in the sacramental mysteries—preeminently in the eucharist, but also in baptism—serves to lift the created gaze upward to the primary object of contemplation, the resurrected and glorified body of Jesus Christ, who is, Calvin says, our life-giving “visible grace,” and the “food of our soul” offered in the plain dress of bread and wine.¹ I shall pursue this thesis by analyzing the following tracts and treatises: Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist (1537), The Necessity of Reforming the Church (1539), The Short Treatise on

the Lord’s Supper written from Strasbourg in 1540, relevant segments from the 1541 and 1559 editions of the *Institutes*, and the late polemical work, *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper* (1561). Let us begin by considering Calvin’s definition of sacrament filtered through his interpretation of the sacramental symbol as didactic device.

3.2 Sacrament as Pedagogical Tool

There is perhaps no better place to begin than with Calvin’s general definition of sacrament found in the discussion of baptism in the eleventh chapter of the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes*. His explanation of the sacramental mysteries in this section of the *Institutes* is introduced with the declaration that “we must take it as certain and indubitable that it is [God] who *speaks* to us by this [sacramental] sign.”

The idea that God ‘speaks’ through the sacramental sign is accompanied by two other important points that persist in his writings on the sacraments: (1) an emphasis on divine condescension whereby God accommodates to human capacity through material, sensuous signs and symbols, and (2) the idea that the sacraments manifest visible grace (*gratia visibilis*) unfolded through the operations of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes:

> So we must believe and be assured that God also truly and certainly does all these things [i.e., destroys wickedness by mortifying the flesh] inwardly in our soul, as we certainly see our body outwardly washed, submerged, and surrounded with water. For this analogy is a very certain rule of the sacraments: that in corporeal things we contemplate and think about spiritual ones because it has pleased the Lord to represent them to us by such figures. Not that such graces are tied to and enclosed in the sacraments, or that they are conferred on us by the power of the sacrament, but only because by this sign and mark the Lord testifies His will toward us, which is that He wants to give us all these things. This is

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seen in the example of the centurion Cornelius who, after he received remission of his sins and the visible graces of the Holy Spirit, was nevertheless then baptized, not in order to have a fuller remission by baptism but for the more certain exercise of his faith. 3

In the case of baptism, then, it is water falling over the head and face of the initiate that issues in divine speech. When the sacrament is performed, a divine declaration is made without subverting, overwhelming, or superseding the material sign. The voice of God echoes in the sign as it conveys the divine word of promise. Accordingly, the first and most basic premise in Calvin’s sacramental doctrine is that while the material sign (e.g., water) conforms to the reality (e.g., the promise of one’s inclusion into the visible body of Jesus Christ), the latter in no way consumes or eliminates the former. The sign does not compete with the reality, as if sign and reality were somehow vying for space in a zero-sum game; rather, sign and reality exist in a simultaneous, mutually reinforcing relationship, each being the condition of possibility of the other.

Calvin’s explanation of the relationship between sign and reality appears to derive, at least in part, from Augustine’s pedagogical principle concerning divine teaching through the intercourse of ‘sign’ (signum) and ‘thing’ (res). In the opening of Book I of De Doctrina Christiana Augustine introduces the rudiments of his semiotic theory, highlighting the didactic function of signs:

All teaching is either about things or signs; but things are learned about through signs. What I have now called things, though, is the strict sense,

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3 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 517; cf. John Calvin, The Catechism of the Church of Geneva, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 133. From his Commentary on Romans: “This foundation [of baptism] being laid, Christians may very suitably be exhorted to strive to respond to their calling. Farther, it is not to the point to say, that this power is not apparent in all the baptized; for Paul, according to his usual manner, where he speaks to the faithful, connects the reality and the effect with the outward sign; for we know that whatever the Lord offers by the visible symbol is confirmed and ratified by their faith. In short, he teaches what is the real character of baptism when rightly received. So he testifies to the Galatians, that all who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.” John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, Calvin’s Commentaries, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 221.
are those that are not mentioned in order to signify something, such as wood, a stone, an animal, and other things like that…. All these, in fact, are things in such a way as also to be signs of other things. There are, however, other signs which are only used for signifying, such as words. Nobody, after all, uses words except for the sake of signifying something…. From this it will be easy to understand what I am calling signs; those things, that is, which are used in order to signify something else…and let us bear in mind all the time that what has to be considered about things is that they are, not that they signify something else besides themselves.⁴

For Augustine, as for Calvin, signs serve the end of instruction—they connote something else, whereas ‘things’ simply are what they are, for they do not refer beyond themselves in the way that signs do.⁵ As G.R. Evans puts it, “Augustine sees [signifying words and materials] as having been divinely instituted for our instruction, so that the signifying word or thing does more than point to what it signifies. It conveys us towards God himself.”⁶ Indeed, what Calvin calls the “vivifying word” of the sacrament is first a word of instruction that initiates learners into the divine mysteries, hence the “signifying” operations of words and things as signs. On these grounds, Calvin can write that when the Apostle Paul “speaks to the faithful of signs…he connects them with the efficacy and fulfillment of the promises which belong to them; but when he contends with the absurd and unskillful interpreters of signs, he omits all mention of the proper and true character of signs, and directs his whole discourse against their perverted interpretation.”⁷ Signs

⁵ Using Augustine’s sign theory in his discussion of the sacramental sign, Calvin writes: “For with regard to its essence the sign differs from the thing of which it is a figure, since the latter is spiritual and heavenly while the former is corporeal and visible; however, because it does not serve as a figure for the thing it represents only as a futile picture but it truly delivers it, why not give it the name? For human signs are figures of things which are absent rather than signs and marks of those present, and they most often deceive us in indicating the absent things: if these signs nevertheless take the name of the absent things, with how much greater reason may those which God has instituted borrow the title of the things they represent? These signs contain the certain and not deceitful meaning of the things, and they have the truth of the things joined with them.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 551.
⁷ Calvin, Comm. Romans 2:25 from CTS.
interpret a reality, and are present in order to be interpreted. That is to say, the sacramental sign is part of a life-giving pedagogy that moves the communicant to see ‘beyond’ the bare material of the sign as part of instruction in the faith.

Following Augustine, the “word” is “vivifying,” Calvin argues, only insofar as it refers to and participates in a reality beyond itself, an animating reality that is the word’s source of meaning (and proper end).⁸ We should take care to note that Calvin does not conceive of the sacramental pedagogy as mere information transmission, as in information being exchanged, in some transactional sense, between pedagogue and pupil. Rather, he insists that what is communicated is the sacred, gracious, and mysterious favor of God the Father that is offered in Christ through the power of the Spirit.⁹ This ‘instruction,’ then, cannot finally be reduced to words—it is something more as it exceeds language’s descriptive capacities. God communicating in and through the material of the sacrament is the essence of its mystery, a theme to which Calvin returns repeatedly in his writings on Lord’s Supper and baptism. When the word of promise is joined with the external element(s)—an act initiated and performed by God’s Spirit, not the one presiding over the ceremony—the sacrament is mystically constituted, presenting a mysterious “visible word” of sacred pedagogy that is made accessible to faith.¹⁰

In conjunction with the sacrament as an instrument of divine instruction, there are three other equally important features of Calvin’s definition that permeate his writings on

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the sacraments. First, he contends that the sacraments serve to mediate the contemplation (la contemplation) of spiritual things (chooses spirituelles) in and through the corporeal (les corporelles), such that through the material elements the communicant contemplates and beholds divine wisdom. Second, in the sacramental act, God is made manifest in and through material things in order to be received according to creaturely capacities. It is on account of the sign (or “the mark” and “sign of contract,” as he occasionally calls it) that we come to know the Lord’s good will towards us, not as an alien or “far off” reality but as one that is brought near, offered according to the capacities of our kind. A material sign is necessary, says Calvin, because humanity cannot encounter the unmediated divine will or essence apart from material accommodation. This is grounded, at least in part, in the rather obvious point that humanity is inescapably embodied and en-fleshed, such that God must meet us according to our most basic creaturely capacities. But more than this, it is rooted in the seriousness with which he takes the flesh of the incarnate Jesus Christ, which is treated not as an irrational accident within world history, or a provisional reality ultimately to be sloughed off, but the primary means by which divine revelation is made manifest in the world. Hence, just as God was made visible in Christ’s incarnate

11 “In corporeal things we contemplate and think about spiritual ones because it has pleased the Lord to represent them to us by such figures (figures).” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 517.

12 This assumption corresponds with Calvin’s insistence that God’s essence always remains beyond the human capacity to comprehend it. Such divine transcendence necessitates the intercession of a supreme mediator who is capable of mediating the divine essence such that humanity experiences the essential being of God ‘truly,’ but without the reduction of this essence to bare materiality or the creature’s ceasing to be creature in the experience. For a fuller discussion, see below, section 4.4.1. See also Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 188–202; E. David Willis, Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, 2; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966); and Myk Habets, “Putting the ‘extra’ back into Calvinism,” Scottish Journal of Theology 62, no. 4 (2009): 441–56.

13 Here we again meet a version of Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation, which was developed in the previous chapter. On God’s use of the common symbols of bread, wine, and water, he writes in the 1559 edition of the Institutes: “Since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.” Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 4.14.3.
humanity, so God gives a visible, tangible sign in the form of the sacramental materials in order to serve as a witness to the divine will; because the visible thing remains a sign, it is not identical to the divine will itself. Third, and most important for what follows, Calvin argues that in order for there to be a sacramental act, the Spirit must operate to manifest God’s visible grace through the material sign in the midst of those who celebrate the mysteries. Without the activity of the Spirit, the sacrament would remain “empty” and “bare,” a mere mass of corrupted and corrupting material. To paraphrase Calvin, in the absence of the Spirit, the glorified flesh of Christ would remain shut off, since his body cannot be “torn away” from its place at the right hand of God. In other words, the effect of the sacrament unfolds according to divine operations rather than human effort. It is precisely the problem of humanity’s attempts at taming and domesticating Christ’s body

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14 “Not that graces are tied to and enclosed in the sacraments, or that they are conferred on us by the power of the sacrament, but only because by this sign and mark the Lord testifies His will toward us, which is that he wants to give us all these things.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 517.

15 “[That God wills good towards us in the sacrament] is seen in the example of the centurion Cornelius who, after he received remission of his sins and the visible graces of the Holy Spirit, was nevertheless baptized, not in order to have a fuller remission by baptism but for the more certain exercise of faith.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 517. Notably, Calvin here emphasizes that the visibility of divine grace preceded the mark of baptism. Therefore, he reads the sacrament of baptism as not itself visually manifesting divine action, but confirming it in a material way. Along these lines, Calvin eschews the doctrine of ex opere operato: “Failure to distinguish between [the office of the sacraments] and the rites originating with man is to confound heaven and earth. Here, indeed, a twofold error prevailed. Making no distinction between things human and divine, they seriously derogated from the sacred Word of God, on which the whole power of the sacraments depend; and they also falsely imagined Christ to be the author of rites which had no higher than a human origin.” John Calvin, The Necessity of Reforming the Church, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 202–03. For further comments on the problematic notion of the effect of the sacraments ex opere operato among Calvin and his reformed colleagues, see R. Ward Holder, “The Pain of Agreement: Calvin and the Consensus Tigurinus,” Reformation and Renaissance Review 18, no. 1 (2016): 85–94.

16 As we will explore in more detail below, a distinction between two types of vision is at work here, one where the bodily eye rests on the material sign, and another where the eyes of faith are engaged so that the God of grace may be seen. This is of a piece with Calvin’s understanding of accommodation, for the visible sign is not a trivial or incidental addition to the word of promise, but an indispensable material testimony that serves to strengthen faith. The doctrine is elegantly expressed in the following declaration from the Lausanne Articles (1536): “The said Church contains certain ones who are known only to the eyes of God alone. It possesses always ceremonies ordained by Christ, by which it is seen and known, that is to say Baptism and the Supper of our Lord, which are called sacraments, since they are symbols and signs of secret things, that is to say of divine grace.” The Lausanne Articles (1536), Art. IV, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 36.
under material elements in the eucharistic sacrifice that Calvin and others among the early Protestants criticized in medieval eucharistic doctrine. But if he wished to dispatch the doctrine of transubstantiation but nevertheless insist on Christ’s bodily presence in the sacrament, what, in his estimation, did the faithful encounter—what did they experience, or come to see—when confronted with the eucharist?

3.3 Seeing that which is present to be seen

The chief error of 16th-century Roman Catholic eucharistic theology, Calvin thought, was that it destroyed the sacramental mystery by reducing the eucharist to a naked display of the re-sacrificed body of Christ under material elements. As he commented, “For in the schools as well as in sermons, they so extolled the efficacy of signs, that, instead of directing men to Christ, they taught them to confide in the visible elements.” In his estimation, as well as that of most of his Protestant contemporaries, medieval Latin doctrine reified the sacred body in the elements such that the practice had little to do with setting before the faithful the divine promises confirmed in the sacrament—that the faithful are nourished on the very body and blood of the glorified Jesus Christ—and instead encouraged an adoration of the material itself, which Calvin took to be indistinguishable from gross idolatrous veneration. He writes:

There are other reasons which make it easy to refute [the doctrine of transubstantiation]. What they say would take away from the mystery which the Lord wanted to represent in His Supper. For what is the Supper except a visible and manifest witness to the promise in the sixth chapter of St. John, which is that “Christ is the bread of life which came down from

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17 For the most comprehensive account of Calvin’s relationship with late medieval eucharistic doctrine, see Kilian McDonnell, John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).
heaven”? So the visible bread must be a sign by which the spiritual bread is set out in a figure for us, unless we want to destroy all the fruit of the sacrament and the comfort which our Lord gave us in order to support our weakness.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 550.}

And again in \textit{The Necessity of Reforming the Church} of 1543, Calvin criticizes what he describes as the sophistry of the doctrine of transubstantiation:

In condemning the fiction of transubstantiation, and likewise the custom of keeping and carrying about the bread, we were impelled by a strong necessity. First, it is repugnant to the plain words of Christ; and second, it is abhorrent to the very nature of the sacrament. For there is no sacrament when there is no visible symbol to correspond to the spiritual truth which it represents. And with regard to the Supper, what Paul says is clear: “We being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (I Cor. 10:17). Where is the analogy or similitude of a visible sign in the Supper to correspond to the body and blood of our Lord, if there is neither bread to eat, nor wine to drink, but only some empty phantom to mock the eye?\footnote{John Calvin, \textit{The Necessity of Reforming the Church}, 204–05.}

Instances of Calvin’s critique of late medieval sacramental doctrine could be multiplied many times over. For our purposes, these passages bring to light two distinct issues. The first concerns the visibility of Christ’s body in the sacramental event. The implicit question being, where is the body, and can it be seen? It is hidden at the right hand of God the Father, says Calvin, and this hiddenness is part of the garb of mystery in which it is cloaked.\footnote{For Calvin, mystery (\textit{mustérion}) is synonymous with ‘the sacrament’ (\textit{les secrèmens}), indicating that the sacrament is grounded in the divine promise (or secret) whereby divinity offers itself to be known through the material symbol. As Calvin writes, “For whenever the author of the old common version of the New Testament wanted to render the Greek word \textit{mustérion}, mystery, into Latin, especially where it related to Divine things, he used the word \textit{sacramentum}, ‘sacrament,’” Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1559 Latin}, 4.14.2. See also Calvin, \textit{Comm. 1 Corinthians} 10:18 from CTS.} But does hiddenness finally account for or exhaust the nature of the mystery? No, he replies. How, then, should we speak of the mystery of the sacrament? By referring to materiality’s participation in the spiritual, the unseen, that which is life giving. And so, Calvin concludes, if the material is construed as somehow constituting or
capturing the body then both the body and the symbol will be destroyed. Why? Because the symbol, by encompassing the Christic body, ceases to be a symbol due to the fact that the physical reality no longer participates in the (spiritual) reality that stands beyond, as the physical collapses the spiritual into itself. Similarly, the Christic body, in being strictly identified with the material thing, is no longer truly the body that is excessively mysterious, but is reduced to the terms of deteriorating matter, bare materiality that is no different in kind than any other material thing. Therefore, it is no wonder, muses Calvin, that those who are beholden to the medieval design treat a piece of eucharistic bread, for example, as a talisman, for their eyes are drawn down to see a mere thing, the power of divinity thought to be contained in a wafer, which from a forensic point of view is decidedly a wafer and nothing more.22

With the exception of the introductory discussion on Calvin’s use of Augustine’s sign theory, so far ‘sign’ (signum) and ‘symbol’ (symbolum) have been used more or less interchangeably in accordance with Calvin’s own usage. However, T.H.L. Parker detects a crude distinction between the terms when it comes to Calvin’s comments on the visual and aural manifestations of God in the Hebrew witness—manifestations that take on a surprising sacramental resonance, particularly within the context of the prophetic visions. According to Parker, “Calvin commonly, but not always, used ‘signs’ to denote [divine] absence, ‘symbols’ to denote [divine] presence.”23 Given that this is not a hard and fast distinction, there is no use in pursuing it with pedantic fervor here. Nevertheless, per Parker’s observation, it is curious that Calvin is willing to use the terms interchangeably when speaking of the Lord’s Supper and baptism, but operates with a more explicit

distinction between them when analyzing the prophetic oracles, visions, and theophanies from the Old Testament.

But perhaps Parker’s claim that a distinction between symbol and sign only being reserved for Calvin’s analysis of the Hebrew witness is not entirely accurate. For example, though not explicit, a distinction between the terms can be detected beginning with the second article of the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, “Concerning the Law.” The catechumen is asked what is entailed in the “celebration of the mysteries” as embodied in the symbols of baptism and Lord’s Supper, to which she responds: “[The symbol] recalls us to the reality behind it, namely, that being grafted into the body of Christ and made members of his, we cease from our own works and so resign ourselves to the government of God.”24 In other words, the *Catechism* suggests one is made present to God (and vice versa) in and through the sacramental symbols. By contrast, when the sacraments are explicitly treated in the fifth article of the *Catechism*, they are called “visible signs,” defined as “outward attestations of the divine benevolence towards us” and the “instrument(s)” whereby God exhibits “the appearance of spiritual and heavenly things in a kind of earthly way.”25 In other words, the signs gesture toward a “heavenly,” or spiritual, reality beyond the physical, without the signs being constitutive of that reality itself. And in a passage where *signum* and *symbolum* coalesce, Calvin writes: “We hold that in [the ordinance of the Holy Supper] the Lord does not promise or set forth by signs anything which he does not exhibit in reality. We therefore preach that the body and blood of Christ are both offered to us by the Lord in the Supper and received by us. Nor do we thus teach that the bread and wine are symbols, without immediately adding that

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the truth they represent is conjoined with them.” Taking these passages together, curiously, a sacrament indicates both divine presence and absence in virtue of its symbolic and sign-making qualities. Thus, Calvin will prefer one term to the other depending on the context and the point to be made.

The interchangeability, but relatively distinct meaning, of *signum* and *symbolum* in the *Catechism* and treatises could be taken as constituting conceptual confusion. The basic question being that in the case of the Lord’s Supper is Christ’s body present (as in the symbolic sense) or far off (as in the sense of the sign)? Or is it that, due to their situational, unsystematic nature, one is left in the lurch when it comes to sorting out these sorts of questions? While there is no doubt these writings present less than straightforward answers to the questions at hand, it seems that this rough distinction between *signum* and *symbolum* expresses a complex theology of divine presence and absence that moves beyond the memorialist and transubstantiation doctrines that dominated the sixteenth-century eucharistic debates. Regina Schwartz comments that Calvin was attempting to chart a ‘middle way’ between the nihilistic sign theory of his Protestant colleague, Huldrych Zwingli, on the one side, who drew an absolute distinction between the sacred body and the eucharistic materials, and the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation on the other, which, as we have already noted, tended to

26 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 205–06.
27 Keeping this distinction in mind may help us avoid claims like those made by Christopher Elwood, that for Calvin “sacramental signs are unlike any other kind of sign with which we are familiar because they do not simply bring into one’s consciousness the thing signified; they in some way communicate the truth or substance of the thing.” Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 68. It would be more precise to say that the sacraments as signs bring into one’s consciousness the thing signified, and as symbols, they communicate the truth or substance of the thing while not exhausting the truth or substance.
28 For one of Calvin’s most organized and explicit responses to Zwinglian sacramental theory, see Calvin, *Institutes* : 1559 Latin, 4.17.22.
over identify the material symbol with the immaterial reality that it was supposed to make present, such that material symbol and divine reality were rendered indistinguishable. 29 To put it in a slightly different register, we might think of Zwingli’s system as overstressing divine absence grounded in a theory of signs, and late medieval doctrine overplaying divine presence, which derives from a problematic theory of symbol. Rather than privileging one or the other, Calvin’s sacramental theology attempts to utilize both. Whatever the case, if Calvin’s account did in fact present an outline for a path that moved thinking about the sacraments beyond Zwinglian memorialism on the one side and late medieval transubstantiation on the other, how does he accomplish this? Part of the answer lies in how he conceives of the visual encounter with Christ’s body in the eucharistic elements, the materiality of the sacraments being the condition of the possibility for ultimately beholding God in the glorified flesh of Jesus Christ.

3.4 Raising the Created Gaze

When speaking of the sacramental sign, Calvin stresses that no ontological transfer takes place between it and the reality it signifies. The purpose of the visible sign is to communicate or signify something that is itself invisible. So in the case of the eucharist,

29 Regina M. Schwartz, “From Ritual to Poetry: Herbert’s Mystical Eucharist,” in Mystics: Presence and Aporia, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143. The Zwinglian and medieval Latin accounts present rival versions of the same basic idea—that Christ’s body is local within an ‘absolute place’ in virtue of its corporeality. The Latin model declares, in the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), “[Christ’s] body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God’s power, into his body and blood.” The Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 1, in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990). By contrast, according to Zwingli, the sacrament is a testimony to the memory of Christ’s bodily suffering, but does not contain Christ’s flesh itself, because the flesh is elsewhere. see Huldrych Zwingli, “Of the Sacraments,” in Commentary on True and False Religion, ed. Samuel M. Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015). In both instances, Christ’s body is theorized as restricted to an absolutely local place, one near (according to transubstantiation, the altar) and the other far off (according to memorialism, heaven).
for example, it visibly “represents to us the body and blood [of Christ],” but is not identical with the glorified body itself, which is presently hidden from the view of the physical eye. Calvin’s use of the term ‘representation’ (repraesentatio) here signals a distinction between the material elements and the spiritual reality, which accords with his broad usage of the concept of sign. Entailed in this, of course, is an implicit repudiation of late medieval theories of local compounding and the Lutheran notion of ‘bodily eating.’ However, alongside this distinction, Calvin also contends that the sacramental sign serves an almost symbolic function, marking “a spiritual mystery, which cannot be seen by the eye, nor comprehended by the human understanding.” The body of Christ is thus “symbolized by visible signs, as our infirmity requires, but in such a way that it is not a bare figure, but joined to its reality and substance.”

The visible signs present more than a “bare figure,” or simulacrum, of the body and blood of Christ, because, as Calvin is keen to point out, the sacramental elements are united to the glorified Son of God through the operations of the Spirit—the elements remaining what they are and the Christic body remaining what it is without mixture or confusion, and without alteration to the substances of either. This is what Calvin means when he speaks of the ‘true’ but not ‘local’ appearance of Christ in the eucharist.

What, then, according to Calvin, does the eye see when it gazes upon the ‘visible sign’ of the eucharistic elements? In the plain sense, the eye sees bread and wine, and this Calvin is happy to affirm. Does this mean that the eucharistic elements present what we

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31 For comments on Luther’s emphasis on ‘bodily eating’ and the controversy with the reformed congregations that it engendered, see Christiane Tietz, “Spirituality and Materiality of the Sacraments in the Lutheran Tradition,” in *Sacrality and Materiality: Locating Intersection*, ed. Rebecca A. Giselbrecht and Ralph Kunz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 149–53.

32 Calvin, *Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, 147.

might call a ‘mere picture’ to the communicant, leaving her to gaze vapidly at material things and by them simply call to mind a vague sense of Christ’s historical suffering? No, Calvin says, for the elements of the sacrament are more than mere memorials or metaphors (contra Zwingli and Oecolampadius), for they are constitutive of Christ’s very body and blood that in turn “nourishes our bodies.” Thus, for Calvin, something more than denotation occurs in the eucharist. What is upon the altar to be seen is truly the corpus Christi in all its life-giving power: “Jesus Christ is there offered to us that we may possess him, and in him all the fullness of his gifts which we can desire.” And yet the eucharistic picture exceeds the eye’s ability to see and the understanding’s ability to comprehend given the transcendent divinity manifest therein. Just as the elements cannot contain the excessive reality of the resurrected and glorified body of Jesus Christ, so the eye cannot fully ‘take in’ the visual display that is present at the table to be seen. But there is a scene to be perceived, and what is seen is given to the faithful by the Holy Spirit, who clarifies the eyes of faith: “By the light of His Holy Spirit He illumines our understanding and gives the word and sacraments entrance into our hearts; otherwise these would only strike our ears and present themselves to our eyes but would not penetrate or move within.” This is a picture of spiritual insight manifest in the sacraments. Indeed, Calvin is convinced that those who have the eyes to see will be led from material reality upward to Christ, who, “though his body [is] contained in heaven” is nevertheless “present by boundless [spiritual] virtue.”

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34 Calvin, Partaking of the Flesh and Blood, 294.
35 Calvin, Treatise on the Lord’s Supper, 148.
36 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 499.
37 Calvin, Partaking of the Flesh and Blood, 312.
Calvin’s appeal to the Spirit’s mediating work in the sacrament is the lynchpin of his eucharistic theology. The Spirit is the means by which the ‘earthly’ and ‘heavenly,’ the visible and invisible, that which is ‘knowable’ and that which exceeds the human capacity to be ‘known,’ are brought together. It is the agent through whom a “vital tension” between “a complex of opposites” is maintained. The ‘bridge’ that Calvin constructs between these seemingly opposed pairs is what Julie Canlis has helpfully described as ‘sacramental ascent’ in his theology. “Ascent is Calvin’s antidote to eucharistic idolatry,” she writes. “The sacraments are ‘steps of a ladder’ that lead us up to the whole Christ, rather than fixating our eyes on ‘different parts’ of him, adoring him ‘in this place and that.’” This is expressed in a slightly different way in the reformed recovery of the famous sursum corda formula, where, in the eucharistic feast, the heart is lifted up to God by the power of the Spirit so that the eyes of faith may see Christ. Without the Spirit there would be no sacramental ascent, no seeing past the material world as it is given.

Calvin begins to develop another line of this pneumatological emphasis when he considers the image of the Spirit as appearing in the bodily form of a dove at Christ’s baptism narrated in Mark 1. In this discussion he opens up the question, which ultimately

40 Calvin writes, “Let us lift our spirits and hearts on high where Jesus Christ is in the glory of his Father, whence we expect him at our redemption. Let us not be fascinated by these earthly and corruptible elements which we see with our eyes and touch with our hands, seeking him there as though he were enclosed in the bread and wine. Then only shall our souls be disposed to be nourished and vivified by his substance when they are lifted up above all earthly things, attaining even to heaven, and entering the Kingdom of God where he dwells. Therefore let us be content to have the bread and wine as signs and witnesses, seeking the truth spiritually where the Word of God promises that we shall find it.” Elsie Anne McKee, trans., John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 133. This passage is restated in the Strasbourg Liturgy (1545), “Instruction on the Holy Supper.”
remains unsettled in his work, of whether or not divine showings qualify as sacraments.⁴¹

In the *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, he reflects on this, writing:

> For though it may be that the communion we have with the body of Christ is something incomprehensible, not only to the eye but also to the natural sense, it is there [in the sacrament] visibly shown to us. Of this we have a very apposite example in a similar case. Our Lord, wishing at his Baptism to give visible appearance to his Spirit, represented it under the form (figure) of a dove. John the Baptist, relating this story, says that he saw the Holy Spirit descending (*qu’il a vu le saint Esprit descendre*). If we enquire more closely, we find that he saw only the dove, for the Holy Spirit is essentially invisible. Yet knowing that this vision is not an empty figure (*vaine figure*), but a certain sign (*un signe certain*) of the presence of the Holy Spirit, he does not hesitate to say that he saw it, because it is represented to him according to his capacity. It is like the communion we have with the body and blood of our Lord. It is a spiritual mystery, which cannot be seen by the eye, nor comprehended by the human understanding. It is therefore symbolized by visible signs, as our infirmity requires, but in such a way that it is not a bare figure.⁴²

A few observations can be made. First, Calvin’s point is not to analyze the Baptist’s vision of the dove as a sacramental species. Rather, an analogy is being worked out between the visible showing of God in the Lord’s Supper (and presumably baptism also) and the showings of God elsewhere in Scripture, of which this passage from Mark 1 is but one instance. He could have just as easily considered the theophany of the three visitors to Abraham in Genesis 18 or the manifestation of the Spirit as flickering tongues of fire in Acts 2. Nevertheless, the passage serves to demonstrate the centrality and dynamic quality of vision in Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments. Second, Calvin uses the Baptist’s vision to narrate the descent of God in and through bodily materials that in turn lifts up the human gaze. Calvin’s theology of vision in the sacraments follows this pattern.

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⁴² Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, 147. This image is used to make a similar point in Calvin, *Partaking of the Flesh and Blood*, 269–70.
of descent (of God) and ascent (of human vision). As he will write elsewhere, the Spirit comes down to meet us in the sacrament in order to “confirm our faith through showing us our heavenly Father’s good will towards us by the sight of our eyes.” Third, although the bodily form in which the Holy Spirit was made manifest is said to be “only the dove” *(qu’il n’a vu que la colombe)*, as if the *figure* was a mere or trivial thing, he goes onto clarify that it was not an ‘empty figure’ that the Baptist encountered, but a certain token of divine presence. Mapped onto his broader understanding of the sacraments, then, we can say that for Calvin the sacramental materials do not present phantom images, but the very presence of God, which can truly be ‘seen’ by those who have the eyes to see. Fourth and finally, in Calvin’s decision to utilize Mark 1 as a powerful illustration of divine sacramental presence, we get a brief look into the Trinitarian dynamic that emerges elsewhere in his discussion of the sacraments, where the Holy Spirit descends to testify to God the Father’s faithfulness to and good will toward the glorified Jesus Christ, who Mark one calls “the beloved one” in whom the Father is “well pleased.”

In a word, the sacramental signs—bread, wine, and water, but also in the surprising *figures* of the Spirit—are links on an infinite chain between the corruptible and the incorruptible, the visible and invisible, the heavenly and the earthly. To return to familiar language, the physical elements of bread, wine, and water are ‘visible signs’ and ‘living symbols’ through which the created gaze and understanding are raised to see God in Christ. And this, Calvin maintains, is the work of the Triune God. In the Supper

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44 We note in this connection de Boer’s interesting observation that “All Mosaic ceremonies are treated by Calvin as sacraments, as signs added to the Word.” De Boer, *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel*, 143n26.
45 “If the reason for communicating with Jesus Christ is in order that we have part and portion in all the gifts which he has procured for us by his death, it is not only a matter of being partakers of his Spirit; it is necessary also to partake of his humanity, in which he rendered complete obedience to God his Father, to
“Jesus Christ is there offered to us that we may possess him,” and thus “we are there made members of [him], being incorporated into him and united to him,” which manifests the “goodness of God to us,” so that we may come to see that “the chief thing is that [God] cares for us internally by his Holy Spirit,” for since “the virtue of the Holy Spirit is joined to the sacraments when they are duly received, we have reason to hope they will afford a good means and assistance for our growth and advance in sanctity of life and especially in charity.” These statements on divine action in the Supper are qualified by an intriguing remark. “For though it may be,” Calvin says, “that the communion we have with the body of Christ is something incomprehensible, not only to the eye but also to our natural sense, it is there visibly shown to us.” In other words, though it may be that the communion the Spirit brings about between Christ and his people is excessively strange, it can nevertheless be ‘seen’ and therefore ‘comprehended’ in the visible elements of the sacrament.

An important question arises at this point: how is this vision of deep sacramental union between Christ and communicant maintained without giving up the equally important difference between Creator and creature, the uncreated and the created? As we have been tracing throughout this chapter, the one answer lies in Calvin’s comments on the role of seeing in the sacraments. Let me put it this way: the turning of vision from seeing (i.e., the gaze cast down upon the bread, wine, or water) to full beholding (i.e., contemplating not an empty figure, but divinity manifest through material things) elucidates the dynamic, pneumatically mediated union between the glorified Christ and satisfy our debts; though rightly speaking, the one cannot be without the other.” Calvin, Treatise on the Lord’s Supper, 146.

46 Calvin, Treatise on the Lord’s Supper, 148–49.
47 Calvin, Treatise on the Lord’s Supper, 147.
those who are called to participate in the divine mysteries. Because this visual union is pneumatically effectuated—and because it is visual union, not ontological union—a safeguard is placed against collapsing the being of the creature into that of the Creator. Let us consider this in more detail with reference to Calvin’s comments on the primacy of the materiality of the sacraments as the necessary condition for communion between Christ and communicant.

3.5 Union through Beholding in the Mirror of Materiality

Some of Calvin’s readers have suggested that his eucharistic theology serves as a concrete illustration of his more well-known soteriological doctrines of communion (koinōnia) and union with Christ (unio cum Christo). Alternatively, he has been criticized on the grounds that he developed a novel account of the sacraments that

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48 We should be clear that this notion of visual union is but one way Calvin goes about describing humanity’s participation in God through the sacraments. There is a rich debate regarding whether or not Calvin’s account of the communion between Christ and humanity leads to an affirmation of theosis or divinization. Calvin’s writings on the sacraments are a natural focal point in this debate. Julie Canlis, Calvin's Ladder serves as a fine example of a recent contribution to these questions. See also J. Todd Billings, Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 105–43. For an older but equally important discussion of the theme of mystical union through the medium of the sacraments, see B.A. Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 72–74.

49 See, e.g., Michael S. Horton, “Union and Communion: Calvin’s Theology of Word and Sacrament,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 11, no. 4 (October 2009): 398–414. Of this substantial union through the medium of the sacraments, there is the representative comment: “While [Christ] is in the Father by the nature of his divinity, we are in him by his corporeal nativity, and he on the other hand in us by the mystery of the sacraments. Thus perfect union through the Mediator is taught: we remaining in him, he remained in us; and so we advance to unity with the Father, since while he is naturally in the Father according to his birth, we are naturally in him, and he remains naturally in us, he himself thus declared: ‘Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, abideth in me, and I in him’ [Jn 6:56]. For none will be in him save those in whom he himself has been, having in himself the assumed flesh of them only who have taken his own…. Irenaeus shows no less clearly that he is speaking of the perpetual union which is spiritual. He says: Our opinion is congruous with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our opinion. For we offer the things which are his, in consistently proclaiming the communion and union of flesh and spirit. For as that which is earthly bread, on being set apart by God is no longer common bread but a Eucharist consisting of two things, an earthly and a heavenly, so similarly our bodies, receiving the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible but have hope of resurrection…. For when the life-giving Son of God dwelt in the flesh, and was as a whole, so to speak, united to the ineffable whole by means of union, he made the flesh itself vivifying, and hence this flesh vivifies those who partake of it.” Calvin, Partaking of the Flesh and Blood, 296–97.
amounted to a fideistic corruption of late medieval doctrine (not unlike that of Zwingli and Oecolampadius) that reduced the material signs to hollow metaphors, or memorials.50 Others still have relegated his teaching on baptism and Lord’s Supper to the status of theological anomaly due to its awkward relationship with the classic Protestant articulation of the doctrine of justification.51 These differences boil down to contrasts in the theological priority one gives to this theme or that in Calvin’s sacramental teaching. In the first instance, precedence is given to created reality’s mysterious participation in that which is uncreated, or ‘spiritual’; in the second, to Calvin’s comments on the implicit priority of the transcendent ‘word’ that in turn is taken to degrade, or at least supersede, the integrity of the materiality of the sacraments (and created world more broadly construed); and in the third, the forensic category of ‘imputed righteousness’ is prioritized, which is seen to eschew the ontological (and metaphysical) speculation that is taken to be present, for example, in his eucharistic doctrine.

Whatever the case, whether critical or approving, to varying degrees what each of these assessments identify is the special consideration Calvin gave to the materiality of the sacraments. In concert with the Spirit, it is posited as the means by which participation in Christ is effectuated in accord with its indispensability for exhibiting and confirming the divine promises to the community of faith. The sacramental materials are

50 See McDonnell, *John Calvin, The Church and the Eucharist*, 294–366. Though it does not explicitly cite Calvin, for a peculiar reworking of the classical Latin doctrine of transubstantiation around the concept of ritual theory, which operates with this critique of Protestant (and modern Roman Catholic) sacramental doctrine as a subtext, see P.J. Fitzpatrick, *In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

thus one of the chief means through which God in Christ is made manifest among the faithful as the “bread of life” spoken of in John 6:35. Far from diminishing the sensuous complexion of the sacraments, Calvin lifts this up as necessary for mediating the activity of God. His sense of the *similitudo*, or relationship, between the senses, which themselves reveal our need in virtue of our contingency, and the sacraments, which manifest divine grace as the places where God meets us according to this need, underscores the pivotal importance of the sacraments’ physical character. The *Catechism* expresses this concisely, highlighting the affective and illuminating qualities of bread, wine, and water. As visible signs, through the work of the Spirit, the sacraments “move and affect the heart,” while also “illuminating the mind,” such that divine virtue is exercised through them as instruments, so that we come to contemplate God’s grace through material things.\(^52\) These sacramental symbols, which operate like mirrors in the Spirit’s hand, “exhibit to us the appearance of spiritual and heavenly things in a kind of earthly way,” because “otherwise we could not attain to them.” And so, the *Catechism* muses, “it is to our interest that all our senses be exercised in the promises of God, by which they are better confirmed to us.”\(^53\) As Calvin puts it elsewhere, “We cannot conceive having a spur to prick us more sharply into life than when [God] makes us, so to say, see with the eye, and touch with the hand and manifestly feel a blessing so inestimable, that we feed upon his own substance.”\(^54\) In eating the Lord’s body and drinking his blood, touch, taste, smell, and sight are roused in order that Christ may be experienced together with spiritual understanding. When the faithful “see with the eye” and “touch with the hand” the

\(^{52}\) Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, 131.

\(^{53}\) Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, 131.

\(^{54}\) Calvin, *Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, 148.
material of the sacraments, Christ, who was once distant, is shown to the covenantal community as one who is present to be beheld up close.\footnote{Calvin, Partaking of the Flesh and Blood, 282.}

Mild disagreement must therefore be registered with Brian Gerrish’s influential reading of Calvin as one who helped introduce a ‘cognitive’ sacramental theory, and as such diminished the physicality of the sacraments. Of Luther, Calvin, and the early Protestants, Gerrish comments that they substituted an “idealistic sacrament of the word” for “the realistic, material, dinglich character” developed and maintained in medieval Catholic theology. Moreover, “Luther,” he says, “never did lose the medieval sense of the Dinglichkeit, the sheer materiality (‘thingness’), of the sacrament,” while Calvin “went much further than Luther in rethinking the sacraments in cognitive (‘idealistic’) terms: that is, as vehicles in the first instance of meaning, although the communication of meaning [that] lead to or ‘effected’ a communion with Christ that eluded understanding.”\footnote{Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude, 109.}

Although Gerrish hedges on construing Calvin’s theory as one that simply turned the sacraments into instruments of “cognitive instruction,” he nevertheless suggests that the reformer’s chief interest was constructing a theory that privileged “the word of instruction,” which in turn relegated the material, or “thingness,” of the sacraments to secondary if not expendable status.\footnote{“Calvin, it seems to me, went much further than Luther in rethinking the sacraments in cognitive (‘idealistic’) terms: that is, as vehicles in the first instance of meaning, although the communication of meaning leads to or ‘effects’ a communion with Christ that eludes understanding.” Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude, 109. Although a minor point, I also think Gerrish is mistaken in referring to ‘cognitive instruction’ as a species of idealism in Calvin’s theology of the sacraments. This is not to deny that Calvin believes that some sort of instruction is going on when the faithful meet God in the sacraments (see the above discussion in section 3.2). However, it is to say that this may be better understood as instruction in piety or wisdom (see my comments below in section 4.1.1) rather than simply instruction of the cognitive faculties.}
Anachronistic though it may be, according to Gerrish’s reading, one might say that Zwingli and Oecolampadius’s sacramental theory is the crystallization of Calvin. However, as we have seen, such a reading is misleading on the grounds that Calvin’s understanding of baptism and Lord’s Supper does not boil down to an explanation of the sacraments as simply presenting an invisible “word of instruction” that ultimately supplants the material, visible sign (or symbol). The materiality of the sacraments is not ancillary to the primal word, but is itself necessary for serving faith by confirming the presence of God in Christ among the covenantal community. One of the most interesting discussions that Calvin provides along these lines is in his defense of the ‘substantial’ (substantia) presence of Christ mediated through the eucharistic elements.

In his reply to the Gnesio-Lutheran, Tileman Heshusius, Calvin offers an explanation of substantia that highlights his keen sense of the indispensability of ‘external symbols’ of bread and wine as mediating Christ’s life to the faithful. The account can be characterized as a dynamic ‘action-theory’ of ‘substance,’ which is to say that it rejects a notion of static bodily presence, and instead emphasizes the dynamic mediation of the Christic body through the operations of the Spirit. Calvin writes: “I am so far from rejecting the term substance, that I simply and readily declare, that spiritual life, by the incomprehensible agency of the Spirit, is infused into us from the substance of the flesh of Christ. I also constantly admit that we are substantially fed on the flesh and blood of Christ, though I discard the gross fiction of a local compounding.”

And extending this argument, “When I say that the flesh and blood of Christ are substantially offered and exhibited to us in the Supper, I at the same time explain the mode, namely,

that the flesh of Christ becomes vivifying to us, inasmuch as Christ, by incomprehensible virtue of his Spirit, transfuses his own proper life into us from the substance of his flesh, so that he himself lives in us, and his life is common to us.\(^59\) Thus, Calvin neither accepts a strict identification of the elements of the sacrament with the sacred body—the “in, under, and with” formula of the Gnesio-Lutherans, for example—nor embraces an absolute divorce between them, as in Zwingli, nor accepts a version of the transmutation of the substance of the sacrament, as in late medieval sacramental theology. In opposition to each of these, he suggests that in the elements of the eucharist, Christ’s body is manifest to the faithful as that which is true life, which can only come from the source of all life, which is God.

I distinctly affirm that this flesh of ours which he assumed is vivifying for us, so that it becomes the material of spiritual life for us. I willingly embrace the saying of Augustine: As Eve was formed out of the rib of Adam, so the origin and beginning of life to us flowed from the side of Christ. And although I distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, I do not teach that there is only a bare and shadowy figure, but distinctly declare that the bread is a sure pledge of figures. For Christ is neither a painter, nor an actor, nor a kind of Archimedes who presents an empty image to amuse the eye; but he truly and in reality performs what by external symbol he promises. Hence I conclude that the bread which we break is the truly the communion of the body of Christ. But as this connection of Christ with his members depends on his incomprehensible virtue I am not ashamed to wonder at this mystery which I feel and acknowledge to transcend the reach of my mind.\(^60\)

Although the modality of Christ’s bodily presence remains essentially mysterious, what the elements reveal is not some figmentem of Christ, Calvin contends, but truly the power of God in Christ himself, and so in the images of the sacrament “even the dullest minds understand this very familiar similitude, that our souls are nourished by Christ, just as the

\(^{59}\) Calvin, The clear explanation of sound doctrine, 267.

\(^{60}\) Calvin, The clear explanation of sound doctrine, 267.
life of the body is supported by bread and wine.”\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, the symbolic elements are animated by the Spirit operating in concert with the faith of the communicant. It is this pneumatic activity that brings about spiritual communion (koinωnia) between Christ and his congregation. Put differently, the “promises” that are sealed in the eucharist are revealed by way of the deep union between communicant and Christ mediated through the Spirit’s interaction with the material of bread and wine. This work, says Calvin, is cause for wonder rather than speculative explanation. To call attention to the visual language that Calvin invokes, utilizing the category of the symbol, he contends that it is not an empty image that is made revealed in the sacrament, but the actual image of the glorified Jesus Christ. As Rhodora Beaton comments, “The visible elements…instruct humanity on the proper understanding of the invisible reality,” which appears as an image in the sacramental elements.\textsuperscript{62} What is shown forth in the sacramental symbol is not a Christic simulacrum, but Christ himself, who is substantially offered.

But why does it matter that Calvin maintains the special dignity of the materiality of the sacraments alongside an affirmation of their role in tutoring the faithful in the divine pedagogy? In a word, it serves to blunt the critique that Calvin’s theology in general, and sacramental theology in particular, is predicated on a variant of neo-Gnostic, trans-worldly privileging of the uncreated over the created,\textsuperscript{63} or crude dualism between transcendence and immanence glossed as the incongruity between ‘body’ and ‘spirit.’\textsuperscript{64} For Calvin, the sacraments, exactly in their materiality, serve to ‘un-conceal’ (aletheia) a

\textsuperscript{61} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1559 Latin}, 4.17.1.
\textsuperscript{63} For comments on the implicit ‘Gnosticism’ in Calvin’s apocalyptic ordering of soteriology, see William R. Stevenson, Jr., “An Agnostic View of Voegelin’s Gnostic Calvin,” \textit{The Review of Politics} 66, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 415–43.
world whose meaning and coherence does not derive from a disembodied alien declaration from without, but in their pneumatically mediated participation in Christ’s own physical body—this is materiality’s symbolic quality that was explored above. The world the sacraments disclose is the covenantal unity between Christ and his members, which in turn serves to attest to God’s covenantal commitment to all creation, as those who partake in the sacramental mysteries bind themselves to witness to through participate in, by love and charity, the divine works spread throughout the cosmos.⁶⁵ If there is a cosmic resonance in Calvin’s sacramental theology, it is not in positing the world-as-sacrament in some vague ontological sense, but in his understanding of the particular material of the sacraments as particular attestations to God’s expansive embrace of the created world, not as something ultimately to be overcome, but reverently acknowledged as the means by which God has made Godself known.

Moreover, the Spirit’s operations in and through the materiality of the sacraments parallel the Spirit’s work exhibiting the glorified flesh of Jesus Christ to the covenantal community. Rather than positing a discarnate Christ—one who fled the body post-resurrection, or whose flesh was transmogrified into something like the ‘celestial flesh’ imagined by the radical reformer, Menno Simons—Calvin suggests that the embodied Christ is present at the right hand of the Father in the flesh, and pneumatically communicated to us as flesh, which is to say in a body exactly as we experience it. He asserts:

As Jesus Christ put on our true flesh when He was born of the virgin, as he suffered in our true flesh when He made satisfaction for us, so in His resurrection He received and took again the same true flesh and at His ascension He transported it to heaven. For this is our hope, that we will be resurrected and will go to heaven since Jesus Christ is resurrected and

ascended there. How weak and fragile this hope would be if flesh like ours itself had not truly been resurrected and entered into the kingdom of heaven in Jesus Christ! This is the permanent truth of the body, that it is contained in a place, that it has a certain measure, that is has a visible form. 

And in connection with this:

Scripture has carefully explained to us Jesus Christ’s ascension, by which he withdrew from our sight and life the presence of His body, in order to take from us all carnal thoughts of Him; and wherever scripture mentions Jesus Christ, it exhorts us to lift up our spirits on high and to seek Him in heaven seated at the right hand of the Father…. Therefore we should worship Him spiritually in the glory of heavens rather than invent this very dangerous form of worship which fills us with stupid and carnal thoughts of God and Jesus Christ.

For Calvin, Christ’s glorified physical body qua physical body is an affirmation of the dignity of our own. Eschatologically speaking, it is the ground for the hope of the created world’s radical renewal as insurrection against the rule of corruption. In addition, his doctrine of the immovable local presence of Christ’s body at the right hand of the Father serves as the point of invitation to the created gaze, that it be lifted up to God in Christ in order to behold him as the hope of the world, the goal towards which all creation is striving. In the sacraments, the covenant community beholds the glory of God in Christ’s glorified body through things that are made.

To bring this reading to a close, let us briefly reflect on two images that Calvin utilizes throughout his writings on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which, in quite different ways, call attention to this notion of beholding the body of Jesus Christ in the sacramental elements. The first is the image of the movement from mere sight to full

66 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 557.
67 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 562.
68 Citing Augustine favorably (from Augustine, Epistle 23, ad Boniface), Calvin writes: “Besides using the term Eucharist or Sacrament of the body promiscuously…[Augustine] clearly explains his meaning in one where he says that the sacraments, in respect of resemblance, receive the names of the things which they signify, and accordingly that the Sacrament of the body is in a sense the body.” Calvin, Partaking of the Flesh and Blood, 305.
beholding as the special grace of the Spirit offered in the moment of sacramental blessing. The second is the mirror-like quality of the sacraments. Reflecting on the life-giving power of the Spirit, Calvin asks: “How then has flesh the power of vivifying, except by being spiritual? Whoever therefore stops short at the earthly nature of flesh will find nothing in it but what is dead; but those who raise their eyes to the virtue of the Spirit with which the flesh is pervaded, will learn by the effect and experience of faith that it is not without good cause said to be vivifying.” When the elements of bread, wine, and water are set before the congregation, they could look upon these things in an “earthly way,” and thus see bread, wine, and water and nothing more. But upon the Spirit’s descent the sacraments become the means by which the gaze of the gathered faithful is raised up—blindness gives way to sight—such that in the sacramental moment the image of the glorified Jesus Christ, who is present at the right hand of God, is beheld in the sacramental symbol.

Similarly, the sacraments are said to be like mirrors, the mirror as reflective device being one of Calvin’s favorite metaphors when he reflects on the way in which invisible divinity is shown through the divine works, Scripture, and throughout the created world. On the vitreous sacramental materials, he writes:

Indeed, our merciful Lord, with boundless condescension, so accommodates himself to our capacity, that seeing how from our animal nature we are always creeping on the ground, and cleaving to the flesh, having no thought of what is spiritual, and not even forming an idea of it, he declines not by means of these earthly elements to lead us to himself, and even in the flesh to exhibit a mirror of spiritual blessings…. Sacraments bring with them the clearest promises, and, when compared with the word, have this peculiarity, that they represent promises to the life, as if painted in a picture.  

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For those with eyes to see, “the earthly elements” of the sacraments lead the faithful to behold the divine promises, not as a disembodied reality, but in a way that is appropriate to created capacities. The sacraments are thus said to be “mirrors” that without becoming the reality they exhibit, nevertheless exhibit that reality in such a way that true “spiritual blessing” is made manifest. This blessing is the manifold wisdom of God revealed in the glorified one, Jesus Christ, who faith beholds in the sacramental moment. Accordingly, “it is easy,” says Calvin, “for the Father of lights, in like manner as he illumines the bodily eye by the rays of the sun, to illumine our minds by the sacraments, as by a kind of intermediate brightness.”

3.6 Conclusion

The preceding discussion demonstrates the prominent place of vision in Calvin’s theology of the sacraments. His sacramental theology is characterized by an imaginative use of components of classical Augustinian theory that also attempted to preserve the essential mystery of baptism and eucharist without giving way to the problematic speculation of medieval thought and ‘empty’ doctrine developed by Protestant figures such as Zwingli and Oecolampadius.

1. Calvin’s prolific use of vision and visual metaphor in his sacramental theology allow him to present a picture of union between Christ and the covenantal community without breaking down the distinction between them. There is visual union—the faithful truly beholding the glorified Christ—that is given by the Holy Spirit through the means of the sacraments such that the created gaze is neither annihilated by this vision nor presented with a facile or ersatz image.

2. Similarly, his sacramental theology focuses on the way in which God meets humanity at the level of the body without overcoming the created gaze or denying the substantial presence of Christ. He rejects any account of divine presence in the sacrament that led to a compromising of either the sacrament’s material integrity or controverted its indispensable place in the divine pedagogy.

3. By lifting up the sacraments as visible manifestations of divine grace (*gratia visibilis*), and by arguing for the absolute necessity of the visible symbols in accompanying the word of promise, Calvin develops a framework for narrating the movement from seeing bare created elements to beholding the absolute object of contemplation, the glorified Jesus Christ. This gave him the tools to discard, on the one side, those sacramental theories that reduced the Christic body to the terms of the material elements (which led to the idolatrous veneration of the elements themselves), and, on the other, to reject any account that imagined Christ as somehow distant and far off from those who celebrated the holy mysteries.
Chapter Four

Beholding God in the Form of the World:

Vision in the 1541 

**Institutes of the Christian Religion**

Father in heaven! What is a human being without you!

What is everything he knows, even though it were enormously vast and varied,

But a disjointed snippet if he does not know you;

What is all his striving, even though it embraced a world,

But a job half done if he does not know you,

You the one who is one and who is all!

Søren Kierkegaard, *On the Occasion of a Confession*

4.1.1 *Introduction*

This chapter seeks to expost the role of vision in Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God, particularly its function in the description of the ways in which knowledge of God is mediated through the structures of the physical world. Unpacking the intricacies of Calvin’s theological epistemology is daunting, and as with almost any other topic in his thought, it has not been treated apart from a healthy amount of contention among interpreters. I will largely avoid delving into these various debates.¹ My focus is altogether different. In keeping with the overarching aim of this study, I am interested in

the visual cast of Calvin’s theological epistemology, especially how visual concepts shape his characterization of the creaturely encounter with God in the world. One of the chief difficulties with this sort of endeavor is that of balancing a clear description of the material to be examined with the particular interests I have in analyzing it, while avoiding becoming bogged down in the ambiguities of Calvin’s own account.

While Calvin’s theological epistemology includes focused reflection on the nature of theological knowledge and the conditions that make it possible, it includes much more than this. Throughout, he explores issues such as carnal knowledge versus spiritual insight, the bearing of a universal sense of divinity (sensus divinitatis) or seed of religion (semen religionis) on human culpability before God, the question of whether or not the divine essence is knowable vis-à-vis the divine works, and the possibility of truly coming to know God through, to use his language, the metaphors of Teacher, Protector, and the Author of all good. Edward Dowey highlights the wide-ranging nature of Calvin’s theological epistemology in the opening lines of his classic study, The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology. “The word knowledge,” he says, “is not purely noetic in Calvin’s theology, and therefore its ubiquity is not ispo facto evidence of an intellectualized faith.” Calvin is concerned with much more than the intellect, rationality, or, as is sometimes assumed, the development of an austere, rigid dogmatic system. Rather, he is interested in the pursuit of wisdom (sapientia), or what we might call knowledge of God

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2 At various points, I will also use the language of ‘visual epistemology’ in connection with this language of theological epistemology. For clarification of this concept and its usage in this study, see Appendix II.


4 Dowey, Knowledge of God, 3.

5 In her study of Calvin’s theology of participation, Julie Canlis makes the following observation regarding “two types of wisdom” in Calvin, developed as early as 1536. Citing the 1536 Institutes and its near contemporary document, the Psychopannychia, she writes: “Calvin says: ‘[Adam] was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by these gifts of grace to God that he could live
determined by life in God (*pietas*).\(^6\) To be sure, at the outset of the 1541 French *Institutes* Calvin describes knowledge of God coupled with that of self as being of a piece with “almost the whole sum of our wisdom” (*toute la somme presque de nostre sagesse*).\(^7\) This is fundamentally different from rarefied rational ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ of an intellectualized cast, because for Calvin the way of wisdom concerns the structure and substance of the Christian life *in toto*, that is, as the human creature’s total response to a life before God—and this rather than mere intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions or an inarticulate ‘feeling’ or vague ‘sense’ of divine presence in the world. Wisdom seeks to discover to whom (or what) we ought to render worship as we proceed to uncover (or have revealed to us) the source from which all truth, goodness, righteousness, judgment, mercy, and power derive.\(^8\) Wisdom, then, is a holistic concept in Calvin’s theology, and the pursuit of wisdom encompasses the creature in her entirety. It is, for Calvin, in the end about the slow, arduous journey of coming to love that one, often elusive, thing, the true God who is the source of all good and the final end to which all things are directed. In what follows, I seek to lift up the centrality of seeing (i.e., the movement from mere sight to

\(^6\) “True piety,” wrote Calvin, “does not consist in a fear which willingly indeed flees God’s judgment, but since it cannot escape is terrified. True piety consists rather in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death. And whoever have been endowed with this piety dare not fashion out of their own rashness any God for themselves. Rather, they seek from Him the knowledge of the true God, and conceive Him just as He shows and declares Himself to be.” John Calvin, *Catechism* [1537], Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972), 2.

\(^7\) Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French*, 23.

\(^8\) Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French*, 23. As Donald McKim points out, at the point where the pursuit of wisdom produces action, *pietas* and *religio* coalesce. On the relationship between these two concepts, Calvin says: “Faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.” Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 1.2.2. See Donald H. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin’s Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 194–95.
true beholding of God and world)\(^9\) in Calvin’s description of the journey of Christian wisdom that has as its goal the knowledge of God.

Before moving on, the following caveat is in order. It is worth noting that Calvin does not explicitly hold that divinity can be seen with the physical eye. However, as we shall see, there are places where he comes quite close to claiming that the vision of God, mediated through created structures, is a distinct possibility. Moreover, at crucial junctures he also intimates that physical sight can, indeed must, be drawn into the dynamic process of knowing God.\(^10\) This, as will be clarified below, describes the contiguous relationship between carnal and spiritual knowledge, the former aligned with what Calvin will sometimes call “seeing with the eyes of the flesh” or “the vision of the bodily eye,” and the latter with what he calls “seeing with the eyes of faith” or what I will at times gloss as “spiritual insight.” Calvin’s theological descriptions of these two types of vision vary, with the key differences often being implicit and quite subtle rather than clearly spelled out. In an effort to clarify, I will examine in due course how the relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of self corresponds to the relationship between physical sight and spiritual vision, where each emerge as discrete epistemological categories that decisively describe the means by which humanity comes to know God.

\(^9\) For an explanation of this distinction and its significance for this study, see the introduction, section 4 above.

\(^{10}\) Because Calvin neither unequivocally rejects nor embraces the notion that God can be seen with the physical eye, it appears that the experience of a physical vision of God is an open possibility. However, given that Calvin is adamant that the essence of God is essentially “invisible,” and therefore cannot be comprehended, except perhaps in fragmentary form, much less seen by humanity, the question becomes: If and when the physical eye is opened to the world and “cannot be compelled [but] to behold him” there (Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 1.5.1), then what “aspect” of divinity is the physical eye encountering, given that God’s essence is not presented “visibly” in the things that are made? We will deal with this question in more detail below.
In an effort to clarify how the possibility of the vision of God might correspond to a doctrine of the knowledge of God, let us turn to briefly consider Calvin’s connection to mysticism, a stream in Christian theology that privileged the doctrine of the *visio Dei*.

4.1.2 *The Visio Dei and Theological Knowledge*

Approaching theological epistemology through focused reflection on the visual has an ancient pedigree.\(^{11}\) This is summed up in the classical language of the *visio Dei*\(^{12}\) or *visio beatifica*\(^{13}\)—the ideal of the creature being granted the direct, unmediated perception of God, which comprised the heart of medieval mystical theology. As Geert Warner describes it:

The *visio Dei* was one of the central issues in late medieval debates on mystical theology…. Seeing God in this life might have been the ultimate goal of the medieval mystics; their theories of vision, speculation and contemplation concerned the intellectual faculties of the mind. Images of all sorts—pictorial, mental, literary—were crucial to medieval practices of

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\(^{11}\) Here, I refer back to comments on patristic and medieval sources—Tertullian, Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas—on the vision of God. See chapter 1, notes 6–9.


\(^{13}\) E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Supplement, Q. 92, Art. 1. For helpful comments on the interrelation of the vision of God and theological epistemology, see William J. Abraham, “The Existence of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John B. Webster and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19–34. And on the *visio beatifica* in particular, see Christian Trotman, *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1995). It is unclear to what degree Calvin either accepts or rejects the notion that God can be contemplated by the creature in an unmediated fashion—an issue to which we will return in the material that follows. On Calvin’s perspective on the beatific vision, Todd Billings comments: “Calvin also speaks of a coming beatific vision, a ‘direct vision’ of the Godhead, ‘when as partakers in heavenly glory we shall see God as he is.’ This final, temporal end is in fact ‘the end of the gospel,’ which is ‘to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us.’ While Calvin does not indulge in detailed speculation about this final, eschatological end, his language concerning a Trinitarian incorporation of humanity into union with God is clear and emphatic.” J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53. See also Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 2.14.3; and Calvin, *Comm. 2 Peter* 1:4 from CTS.
mediation that moved the mind’s eye to focus on the divine in forms of ‘imageless contemplation’. Seeing God was a matter of theological and philosophical debate, including papal doctrines on the possibility and nature of a direct vision of God in this life and/or the hereafter.\textsuperscript{14}

The question of the possibility of the visio Dei—whether it could be attained in the present life or only in future eschatological existence—was an important thread that ran through medieval thought with clear connections to the rich tactile and visual experience of religious devotion of the time. This broadly characterizes the religious and intellectual context in which Calvin’s theology was written. Though the degree to which Calvin was influenced by trends in late medieval theology are contested, it is no doubt the case he was concerned with the questions of if and how one can see God—concerns that appear to be inherited on account of familiarity with the mystical tradition.\textsuperscript{15}

Given Calvin’s historical proximity to late medieval thinkers, it is hardly surprising that traces of mysticism—or at least concern with the mystical tradition—would show up in his theology.\textsuperscript{16} When compared to older sources, like Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas, or Cusanus, Calvin’s account of the opening stages of the visual


\textsuperscript{15} The question of Reformation theology’s connections to late medieval mysticism has been a topic of interest in recent scholarship. While the broader issue of the mystical tradition’s influence on Calvin and a theology of vision is relevant here, tracing out relevant influences is ultimately beyond the scope of this chapter. For a comprehensive account of Calvin and mysticism around the topic of the unio cum Christo, see Dennis E. Tamburello, Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{16} One of the central questions debated by late medieval mystics was that of the means by which the soul was brought into union with God—by love (affect) or by knowledge (intellect)—and did this union bring about the abolition of personal identity. These issues are introduced in Calvin, Institutes: 1559 Latin, 2.8.18 and 3.11.10. For a treatment of these issues among the early Protestants, see David C. Steinmetz, Reformers in the Wings: From Geiler Von Kaysersberg to Theodore Beza, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127–28. And for discussion of these issues in Calvin in particular, see Francois Wendel, Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought, trans. Philip Mairiet (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 235–39; and David Willis-Watkins, “The Unio Mystica and the Assurance of Faith According to Calvin,” in Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag: Festschrift für Wilhelm Neuser zu seinem 65. Geburtstag, ed. Willem van’t Spijker (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), 77–78.
encounter with God is unique in that he insists one must start with carnal sight, first looking inwardly to contemplate the self then outwardly to contemplate the world, before moving on to catch a sight of “the glimmer of divinity.” It is the inward turn that is the first movement in one’s progress towards knowledge of God. As we shall see, this initial turn becomes the condition for the possibility of seeing God, which sets the stage for the type of vision of God that Calvin believes humanity will be given, which is that of coming to see God through the eyes of faith. Indeed, as I will spell out in more detail below, this vision has as its goal the contemplation of God “directly and up close…in the face of His Christ, who can only be seen with the eyes of faith.”17 The idea that God can be seen “directly in the face of His Christ” is a distinctive quality of Calvin’s version of the visio Dei that contrasts with the older medieval tradition (both scholastic and mystical), which held that unmediated perception of the divine essence was possible.18 Indeed, Calvin’s perspective on the visio Dei brings together a vision of the divine that is at once mediated and unmediated.

Let me now round out this introductory material by briefly commenting on the source that will be the object of this section of the study, the 1541 French edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion. I will offer rationale for why I have selected the 1541 French over the more commonly used 1559 Latin, provide some cursory remarks on the nature and purpose of the Institutes from recent scholarship, then will end with a few programmatic comments on issues that will be taken up in the body of the chapter.

17 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 46.
18 For representative accounts of the unmediated beholding of the divine essence, see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a, Art. 12–13, 1a2a, Art. 4, and 3a, Art. 10. See also, Nicholas de Cusa, Vision of God, 45–50.
4.1.3 The 1541 French Edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion

I will proceed with an analysis of vision in Calvin’s theological epistemology as presented in the 1541 Institutes, an edition that is generally taken to be more pastoral and accessible in content and tone when compared to later versions, or, as Elsie McKee describes it, “a text of pastoral theology in the language of the common people [that is] consciously directed to them.” The theological method the 1541 follows is that of the loci communes model, which produced a work that may be characterized as a catechetical “summary of piety,” or exposition of the basic dogma of Christian theology with an eye to its relevance for and application to common, everyday life. In other words, the work is explicitly concerned with cultivating the life of faith among the faithful—a design that coheres with Calvin’s commitment to setting forth the basic content of Christian wisdom.

Moreover, given that the 1541 French is based on the reorganized and expanded 1539 Latin, the argument presented is raw and direct, not bogged down in

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20 Although Calvin does not use the term loci communes, theological loci, or theological commonplaces to describe his argumentative method in the 1541 Institutes, I use it here in the technical sense, i.e., as cohering with Melanchthon’s “rhetorical approach to theological method…[where] the subject matter of theology is [taken to] already [be] present in Scripture. The job of the theologian is to learn the common topics of Scripture, the doctrinal veins of Scripture, so that he may be driven further into Scripture to confirm what Scripture expresses clearly elsewhere.” Christian Preus, introduction to Commonplaces: Loci Communes 1521, by Philip Melanchthon (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 9–10.


22 Frans Breukelman traces the transition in structure between the 1536 and 1539 editions of the Institutes, with the 1539 setting the stage for the 1541 French translation. In the 1536 edition “the essence of doctrine” took the form of ‘Law,’ ‘Faith,’ and ‘Prayer’ with a closing chapter on ‘The Sacraments.’ In the 1539
some of the highly technical intra- and extra-Protestant theological controversies that make their way into later translations. For these reasons, the 1541 edition is a good place to finish tracing out the lineaments of a broader theology of vision in Calvin, because it resists detaching the work of theology from ordinary lived experience, or evacuating the theological relevance of vision to a reality beyond the present world. Calvin consciously places the work of theology in service of the life of faith, common or otherwise. Vision, accounted for theologically, then becomes about the present experience of encountering God in the place where one finds oneself.

On the Institutes in general, Marilynne Robinson comments, “Cauvin’s virtuosic scholarship [contained in the Institutes] could be thought of as monumental public art, by analogy with the work of contemporaries like Michelangelo.” Perhaps this is a bit of an overstatement, but insofar as Calvin was convinced that God’s “form and image” had been “imprinted,” not merely on the interior of the individual, but “on the edifice of the world,” and so concluded that theology’s task was to make plain that mysterious thing which has been there all along, the Institutes could be seen as a kind of “public art,” perhaps artistic production of the highest order. I proceed, then, with the intriguing idea that Calvin’s Institutes themselves may be functioning as a kind of mirror to the world, a

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23 For comments on the censure of the 1539 and 1541 Institutes by the Parlement de Paris in France, which may have provoked polemics in later editions of the Institutes, see Wulfert de Greff, The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide, trans. Lyle D. Biema (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), 199–200.

‘re-presentation’ of the divine mark, as the Institutes themselves reflect back something of the image of God imprinted on creation.

But leaving aside the question of whether or not the Institutes really qualify as ‘art,’ highlighting the public nature of the Institutes is important. By calling the work ‘public’ Robinson does not mean ‘common,’ as in the Institutes offer something commonly accessible to all regardless of social place, educational status, etc. While it certainly includes this, by calling the Institutes public, I think she has in mind something more expansive—that as a literary work of theology, the Institutes seek to address the dynamics of human life lived in the grand storied movements of the cosmos before God (akin to Michelangelo’s “public art” in this sense). According to this characterization, the Institutes are concerned with humanity as called beyond private, walled-off devotion, and therefore into the world, this world, where the visible marks of God can be found.25 This fits quite well with the stated nature and aims of the 1541 French Institutes, for it is a volume engineered both to encourage public reformed religious devotion and exposit its theological rationale, a motive Calvin makes plain in his prefatory address to King Francis I, an important theological document in its own right to which we will turn in the material below.

Continuing this reflection on the public and representational concern of the Institutes, in a sketchy but suggestive essay, Lee Palmer Wandel argues the Institutes

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25 If we follow Robinson’s suggestion, taking the Institutes to be an instance of “public art” dedicated to turning Christians outside themselves and into the world, then perhaps they can be read as a “textual icon,” an example of a uniquely Reformed Protestant piece of religious art, that presents in microcosmic form a diminished version of the macrocosmic vision of God in creation. While the “iconic” nature of the Institutes is a suggestive idea, I do not intend to pursue the idea further in this chapter. Although she does not explicitly use the language of “textual icon,” the idea is implied in Lee Palmer Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye” in Early Modern Eyes, ed. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Boston: Brill, 2009), 138–41.
present a sustained meditation on vision, visuality, and religious visual art.26 She makes the simple but insightful observation that the broader “visual environment” in which Calvin operated, and against which some of his most biting polemics were directed, is no longer available to us. However, what is available, even if it exists only as sanitized museum artifacts—altarpieces, murals, illustrated prayer books, and so on—ought to be taken into account as crucial pieces of context for Calvin’s theological work. Though it is difficult for contemporary readers to imagine and fully appreciate, Calvin “came of age in a world of visual density, richness, eloquence, and conceptual complexity.” This provided the conditions for the possibility of his theology as articulated in the *Institutes*, even as the theology itself would seek to deconstruct its visual context—critique often directed at various forms of secluded devotion—in the interest of rebuilding a viable alternative, that of an extrinsic, open piety.27 To Wandel’s point, unlike some of his contemporaries who were responding to similar aspects of late medieval thought and practice (Zwingli being the most prominent among them), Calvin does not shed or diminish the role of vision in the development of his theological program, but utilizes it to describe the dynamics of divine self-revelation in the world. Wandel’s evaluation reinforces and extends Robinson’s perspective on the visual and public nature of Calvin’s *Institutes*.

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26 Larry Silver offers a helpful definition of “visuality,” saying that it “is to vision as sexuality is to sex; that is, visuality presents the discourse and particularized cultural habits of viewing art, layered upon the physiology of vision itself.” Larry Silver, review of *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, August 3, 2000, College Art Association Reviews, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/150. With respect to the present study, this definition is helpful in that it gives us a way of thinking about the *Institutes*, and indeed all the other primary material considered up to this point, as reflective of a particular set of visual habits that are layered upon a specific understanding of the physiology of sight and its larger theological significance.

More than anything else, Wandel takes the *Institutes* to be a sustained meditation on the ways in which God offers Godself to be known by creatures. As didactic instruments of late medieval religious devotion, images and other religious objects suggested that God’s revelation was simple, immediate, self-evident, reducible to line, color, and shape. Calvin would come to call such devotion and its theological underpinnings into question. The *Institutes*, so argues Wandel, begin with a fundamentally different axiom, namely, that “[divine] revelation spatially and temporally exceeds human ‘comprehension.’”28 In other words, divine revelation, while knowable, is fundamentally excessive. Accordingly, the *Institutes* present a sustained argument that the revelation of God is not reducible to the terms of finite human comprehension. Certainly humans might come to know God through God’s revelation in the world, but this would never for Calvin constitute full comprehension, or what he at times refers to as “full knowledge.” Wandel suggests that important consequences flow from this. For example, according to Calvin’s account of the Incarnation event, it cannot be reduced to the terms of the absolutely (historically) local, as if the Word’s taking on flesh simply had to do with a human body bound by time and space. Certainly the Incarnation encompasses this, but for Calvin the redemptive reality bound up with it cannot be narrowed to the terms of finite temporality and spatiality, or the world’s ‘history’ in the narrow sense. As his eucharistic theology makes clear, the suffering human body of Christ must correspond to something beyond itself. Similarly, images themselves are not necessarily a problem for Calvin, but images that suggest the human maker’s imagination

can form a legitimate image of divinity are to be rejected. This, Wandel rightly points out, is an epistemological issue in Calvin, rather than one having to do with problems surrounding the nature of physical and material reality. If Wandel is correct about this, then the *Institutes* walk a razor’s edge. They attempt to balance between embracing, on the one hand, the mysterious reality of divine incomprehensibility that points to the dependent nature of all human knowledge, and, on the other, the idea that divine revelation is always and everywhere clear, perceptible, and available to all. Indeed, as we shall see, tracing this relationship is the whole point of the opening chapter of the 1541 *Institutes*, “Of the Knowledge of God.”

Following Wandel, then, I contend the tension between the excessive, incomprehensible nature of divine revelation and its concurrent clarity is the fundamental issue being addressed in the opening sections of the *Institutes*. Calvin deals with this by framing the matter with visual categories—to be sure, the argument of the opening sections of the *Institutes* cannot be understood apart from his theological rendering of vision. In what follows, I will explore Calvin’s introduction to the aforementioned issues by way of a close reading of the *Preface Addressed to King Francis I*, and then will deal in detail with the visual elements of his theological epistemology as they emerge in concert with his discussion of the self, creation, and law.

4.2.1 *Vision in Calvin’s Preface Addressed to King Francis I* (1541)

One of the more unexpected places one could go to uncover the seeds of a theology of vision in Calvin is his *Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France*. In the most
comprehensive treatment of vision in Calvin of which I am aware, Zachman’s *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, the Address only receives one oblique mention in connection with Calvin’s dogmatic construal of the distinguishing marks of the so-called “true church.” Beyond this, Zachman gives the document no attention. The Address was initially prepared on August 23, 1535, and first appeared as part of Calvin’s 1536 Latin edition of the *Institutes*. When read with visual interest in mind, a rudimentary but suggestive theology of vision emerges that Calvin then develops over the course of the body of the *Institutes*.

The appeal to King Francis I functions primarily as an apology for the reformed movement both within and outside of France. Its tone is conciliatory yet firm. And in spite of its sophistication and candor, one can pick up on a bit of unguarded biography, the longing for a beloved homeland, bleeding through in the opening paragraphs of the letter. “By my labor,” says Calvin, “I especially wanted to serve our French people, some of whom I saw were hungry and thirsty for Jesus Christ, and very few of whom had a right acquaintance with him.” Then the key qualification that underscores Calvin’s status as an exile abroad: “Do not think that I am here concerned with my own defense, to beg for return to the land of my birth; although I have such feelings of humanity for it as are appropriate, nevertheless as things stand now I do not suffer great sorrow to be deprived

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31 For the history of the Address and its apologetic and theological function across all editions of the *Institutes*, see Bonnie L. Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 264–79. For more on the transformation of Calvin’s ecclesiological stance, see Kenneth J. Woo, “Beyond the Nicodemite: The Twofold Audience of John Calvin’s *Quatre Sermons* (1552),” Sixteenth Century Society Conference (referreed presentation, New Orleans, LA, October 17, 2014), where the author points to the years 1541–1543 as the point at which Calvin appears to have given up on the possibility of reconciliation between the reformed movement and Rome. Along these lines, for a bold thesis on Calvin’s self-interpretation as a “prophet” of the evangelical movement in light of his newfound view that the King of France was functionally a tyrant in the years following 1550, see Jon Balserak, *John Calvin as Sixteenth-century Prophet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 66–126.
of it.”

The fact that he writes to the head of the French people in the French tongue is a function of his self-understanding as one who has been tasked with offering “guidance and direction” to those who, however lowly and “common,” have been initiated into the “school of God.”

That is to say, Calvin understands himself to be writing primarily as a teacher in Christ’s church, though nevertheless as a French subject, as one “wishing to communicate [a doctrine of salvation] which might be fruitful to [the] French Nation,” particularly on behalf of the “poor church,” the community of the common, the tyrannized, the unlearned, and the simple—those from whom, as he assesses the situation, the truth had been hidden by alleged “trickery and betrayal.”

Calvin’s argumentative method and rhetorical skill come into view early in the piece. He judiciously refrains from accusing Francis I of standing against the reformed movement or opposing some abstract notion of “true church.” Rather, he attacks two extreme ecclesiastical factions—one “traditional” and the other “fanatical”—both of whom, Calvin claims, distort and degrade the reform movement, bringing it into disrepute. The first group identified is Roman Catholic, perhaps epitomized in Calvin’s mind in the heretic-hunters of the “Sorbonne schools,” the “mothers of all errors,” “scientists of the wind,” or “sophists” as he sometimes calls them (i.e., The Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris), and the Parlément de Paris.

33 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 3.
35 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 353.
36 On the identity of these groups in connection with the censure of Protestant doctrine in France during the 1520s and 1530s, see James K. Farge, C.S.B., “Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris,” in The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. x (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xx.
[the realm of France] with fire and sword” in an effort to snuff out Protestant teaching.\(^{37}\)

The second group appears to be aligned with early and diverse strains of Anabaptism emanating out of Germany and Swiss lands—groups that Calvin places together under a single heading without distinction. To Calvin’s mind, these are fanatical Protestants from whom he wanted to distance the reformed movement. The Roman heretic-hunters tyrannize the reformed from outside; the Protestant fanatics, or “new Donatists” committed to some evasive ecclesial purity, threaten to undo them from within, even if the two Protestant movements couldn’t be further apart.

Referencing Satan as the captain of the Anabaptists, he declares that “By [Satan’s] Anabaptists and such kind of people he excited a number of sects and differences in opinion to obscure [God’s] truth and finally to quench it.”\(^{38}\) It appears Calvin means to demonstrate that a vicious and misplaced tenacity motivates the Catholic attack on the reformed movement, while also showing the attack, if even remotely legitimate, must be understood as valid only insofar as it ought to be directed at a deviant species of Protestant radicalism with which the reformed have been unfairly lumped. Indeed, the ferocious attack Calvin launches on his fellow Protestants surpasses that directed against his Roman opponents. In an effort to move beyond internecine gridlock, Calvin’s project of offering a clear, systematic statement of reformed doctrine is placed in


service of a larger political agenda—disentangling the reformed movement and its cause from the Protestant radicals, thus proving the French Catholic heresy hunt is misguided. This is coupled with the subtext that the Sorbonnists’ work may also functions as an extension of Satan’s in French lands, given the social disorder sown in French blood through persecution. The implicit point is that Francis I’s quarrel is not with the reformed congregations, but with Satan himself, the master architect of disorder, blindness, and strife, who works through seemingly opposed religious parties.

The structure of the Address is broken into three major sections. In the first, a salutation is offered with an appeal to Francis I that he read the present confession and weigh it according to “wisdom.” Included here is an admonition concerning the guidance of “God’s scepter” as it relates to earthly government and the realm over which Francis has been placed, the basic point being that earthly authority is derived from and finally accountable to God’s reign in the world. In the second section, Calvin gives a description of the function of the rule or analogy of faith (regula fidei or analogian tes

39 In the penultimate paragraph of the Address, Calvin deploys language that suggests the reformed are approximating martyrdom as they endure persecution under Francis: “If...these impetuous madmen forever practice cruelty by prison, beatings, Gehennas, amputations, and burnings, without your putting things in order; we will certainly be near to death, like sheep devoted to the slaughter.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 22.
40 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 8. On the classical background to the relation between wisdom, jurisprudence, and epieikeia (fairness or equity) in Calvin’s political thought and that of his humanist contemporaries, see Guenther H. Haas, The Concept of Equity in Calvin’s Ethics (Carlisle, Cumbria CA: Paternoster Press, 1997), 33–46.
41 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 7; cf. John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to The Romans, ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 477–88. One such representative comment draws on Rom 13:1: “For since it pleases God thus to govern the world, he who attempts to invert the order of God, and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on war with him.” When Calvin’s warning in the Address concerning the right ordering of political power is read in light of this comment on Rom 13:1, it is clear that he understands the pattern for rightly ordered earthly government to be derived from an order in the cosmos that is set and manifest according to divine providence. However, this providence may not be “naturally” known, for it is mediated “in the teaching of the living God and of His Christ, whom the Father has established as King ‘to rule from one sea to the other, and from the rivers to the end of the earth’ (Ps 72[8]).” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 8. To deny this and carry on civil matters as if they do not originate from the divine order manifest in the rule of Christ is therefore the first movement towards chaos.
pisteos), which serves as an appeal to Francis that he read reformed doctrine against the plain teaching of scripture. Because Francis is not a neutral party on the question of the legitimacy of reformed Protestant doctrine and therefore needs to be persuaded, it is curious that Calvin appears to assume he and Francis may share some basic assumptions about the relationship between the teaching authority of the church in connection with that of scripture. Whatever the case, in the third section, Calvin turns to explicit political questions, offering a systematic rebuttal of the charge that the reformed movement is inherently treasonous, seditious, sectarian, and chaotic.

The most interesting and, for our purposes, relevant section of the Address is where Calvin begins to answer the accusation that reformed teaching is novel due to its departure from the teaching authority of the early church fathers and, by extension, its departure from ecclesiastical tradition. In many ways, this is the heart of the matter in the Address, because the early charge of heresy had to do with discerning Protestantism’s relationship to ecclesiastical tradition as part of a wider effort of discerning the degree to which it departed from contemporary and ancient Roman Catholic teaching. In his reply, Calvin carefully works through the nature of the accusation and what it means for the church to “yield to tradition” in its articulation of doctrine. He also treats the testimony of the Hebrew prophets against the cult of Israel (the reader can detect a hint of Calvin’s self-identification with these ancient prophets), as well as the tensions between the church councils vis-à-vis the authority of the holy Apostolic Seat. It is here, particularly in his use of Ambrose, Augustine, Cyprian, Epiphanius, Hilary, and others that Calvin

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42 The argument laid out in this section of the Address is extended and significantly elaborated in John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” (1544), in John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, ed. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 1:123–234; see esp. 211–34 for Calvin’s use of the authority of the church fathers to defend against the charge of schism.
deploys a rich array of visual metaphors that stand in an oppositional relationship with one another: clarity versus obscurity, visibility versus hiddenness, sight versus blinded sense, and darkness versus light. These pairs are unfolded as part of Calvin’s sketch of what he takes to be the nature and marks of the visible church.

4.2.2 The Regula Fidei and the Opaque Testimony of the Church Fathers

Among the early reformers, the use of patristic theology in the matter of scriptural and doctrinal exegesis took a number of forms. When Calvin appeals to this teaching, he contends that it must be weighed against the “clear and plain visible witness of scripture,” for patristic thought is neither uniform nor internally consistent. In order to get a grip on how Calvin understands the way in which Christian teaching is to conform to scripture’s testimony, we must consider his comments on the analogy of faith (analogia fidei) or rule of faith (regular fidei), a much disputed concept in the history of Christian doctrine.

Though we could easily go beyond the scope of the Address to construct a definition of the rule of faith in Calvin, for the sake of establishing the immediate context in which Calvin’s use of the church fathers appears in the Address, it will be most useful if we confine ourselves to his comments there.

Calvin invokes the language of the rule of faith in the opening section of the piece, where he lays out the method by which his argument should be read. Citing Romans 12:6 as the natural starting point, he asserts:

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43 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 14.
45 E.g., John Calvin, “Confession of Faith, in Name of the Reformed Churches in France,” in John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, ed. Henry Beveridge (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 2:141; for comments on the language of analogiam fidei in Rom. 12:6, where Calvin aligns the rule of faith with “the first principles of religion,” see Calvin, Comm. Romans 12:6 from CTS.
When St. Paul wanted every prophecy to be conformed to the analogy and likeness of faith, he gave a most certain rule for testing every interpretation of scripture. Now if our teaching is measured by this rule of faith we have the victory in hand. For what is more fitting for faith than for us to recognize that we are completely naked of every power or ability, so that we may be clothed by God? empty of every good, so that we may be freed by Him? blind, so that we may be given sight by Him? crippled, so that we may be made upright by Him? For us to give up all claim to glory, so that He alone may be glorified, and we in Him?46

That humility is named as one of the hallmarks of faith is significant, because it connects to an important trope in Calvin’s thought, which is that the formulation of sacred doctrine should be done from a posture of humility, the marks of which are prayer47 and a basic position of receptivity on the part of the human heart,48 where it is (or should be) continually softened and laid open to the Holy Spirit’s ministry.49 The one who seeks to articulate doctrine conformed to the rule of faith, therefore, does not seek her own fame, but is continually self-effacing in an effort to articulate something true about God’s revelation in the world. Humble, prayerful obedience to the faith is the cardinal starting point for biblical orientation. To paraphrase Francis Bacon’s famous dictum, for Calvin, if the faith handed down from scripture is to be commanded then it must be obeyed.

Calvin accomplishes two things by starting with receptive humility and the life of prayer as the basic posture that should characterize the act of interpretation. First, he wrests teaching authority from the tyranny of the interpreter and places it beneath the

47 See John Kelsay, “Prayer and Ethics: Reflections on Calvin and Barth,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (April 1989): 169–84, especially 171, where Kelsay points out that in the famous section on prayer in *Institutes* 3.20, Calvin explicitly names the gift of Christ as the object towards whom faith strives, such that prayer becomes one of the means by which one’s faith “gazes” on the treasure of the Lord’s gospel. See Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 3.20.2.
48 For a discussion of the heart as the seat of faith, see his comments on Rom 10:10 in Calvin, *Comm. Romans* 10:10 from CTS.
49 Calvin writes: “A saying of Chrysostom’s has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: ‘When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, “Delivery”; what was the second rule, “Delivery”; what was the third rule, “Delivery”; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, “Humility.”’” Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 2.2.11.
authority of the Spirit. Second, he subordinates church tradition and the history of exegesis to the possibility of “refined” and “sounder” interpretation. Calvin is adamant that what he calls “sounder interpretation” does not mean aimless innovation. The type of interpretation with which he is concerned seeks to discern how the ancient teaching responds and speaks into one’s present circumstances. As David Steinmetz has commented, “[For Calvin] ancient writers provided insight into Scripture through their learning and holiness, but their opinions, however worthy of consideration, were no better than the exegesis on which they rested. The opinions of the early fathers, like the opinions of Calvin and his contemporaries, were always subject to correction by better exegesis. In the end, what was normative for Calvin was the teaching of Scripture, correctly understood, and not the teaching of any father, however venerable.”50 Submission to the regula fidei, then, means recognizing (and embracing) the limitations and frailty of one’s own abilities as well as that of the prior tradition. Calvin puts the matter plainly: “Those who do not keep this order cannot have any certainty in faith since the holy persons of whom we are speaking were unaware of many things, often do not agree among themselves, and sometimes contradict themselves.” Then comes an extreme claim with an ironic reference to Psalm 45:10: “Obedience to the faith should be so ordered that it will ‘forget its people and its father’s house.’”51 While patristic theology and subsequent church tradition functions much less like a fence for domesticated but badly behaved animals and more like a training halter for the feral, there is no doubt a place in Calvin’s method for the positive contribution of the church fathers. The novice in

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51 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 13; emphasis mine.
the faith benefits from patristic training, but the tradition of thought and practice that flows out of the fathers by no means constitutes the proper bounds of Christian doctrine.\(^{52}\)

In his closing statements on the method by which patristic thought should be handled, Calvin employs his first reference to vision. Citing 1 Corinthians 3:21–23 as an extension of Romans 12:6, he writes: “But we read [the] writings [of the fathers] with such judgment and attention that we always have before our eyes what St. Paul said: ‘all things are ours to serve us and not to rule over us, and we are all united to one Christ whom we must obey in everything without exception’.”\(^{53}\) It is curious that the clause from the 1541 French that reads “que nous auons toujours deuât les yeux” or “always before our eyes”\(^{54}\) is rendered “ut semper meminerimus” or “always before the mind” or “present before the memory” in later Latin translations.\(^{55}\) This Latin gloss on “les yeux” suggests that scripture’s teaching is set before us for the purpose of continual guidance, as a sort of docent, or guide animal, that we are asked to follow. To encounter the teaching of scripture with “the eyes” does not, of course, mean we literally “see” its teaching in an immediate and untroubled way, as if it were as simple as reading and

\(^{52}\) William Whitaker’s explanation of Augustine’s remark that “I would not have believed the gospel, unless the authority of the catholic church had moved me” advances on Calvin and presents a coherent reformed vision of the relation between scripture as divine revelation and the question of ecclesiastical authority. Whitaker writes, “Augustine in that place is instructing tyros and novices, and exhorting them in the first place to attend to the church as their mistress and admonisher, and to follow her judgment…. We do not immediately understand everything ourselves; we must therefore listen to the church which bids us read these books. Afterwards, however, when we read them ourselves…and duly weigh what they teach, we believe their canonicity, not only on account of the testimony or authority of the church, but upon the inducement of the other and more certain arguments, as the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the majesty of the heavenly doctrine, which shines forth in the books themselves and the whole manner of their teaching.” William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture against the Papists especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, ed. William Fitzgerald (Cambridge, 1849), 1:288, quoted in Nigel Voak, “Richard Hooker and Sola Scriptura,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 1 (April 2008): 103. Thanks to Ben Dillion for pointing me to this material in Whitaker.


instantly comprehending words on a page, hearing it audibly declared, or receiving it as some sort of sudden, direct, and unmediated revelation. Rather, Calvin suggests that when we encounter scripture’s testimony we hold its witness in our mind’s eye, as it were, so that we may come to consider and reconsider how it is “all things are available to serve and not rule over us.”

The point he presses in this part of the Address is that Paul “sets before our eyes” a clear directive for using scripture in connection with all subsequent church teaching. Given that all Christians are united to the “same Christ,” there are no distinctions in terms of status and therefore no hierarchies within the ecclesial body. Thus, all church teaching is open for common use, so long as it is tested against the testimony of scripture and according to the witness of the Spirit. If one attends to this directive—if the eyes are able to perceive and follow what is plainly set before them—then one will find that the “obedience of faith” is not obedience to a taskmaster known as “tradition,” but to an ever-responding faith that flows out of common union with Christ cultivated by the Holy Spirit. To obey any other than Christ, according to Calvin, is to contract oneself to “a different master,” which is a hard and dangerous prospect.⁵⁶

Following these comments on the regula fidei, Calvin launches into a robust defense of the reform movement’s use of the patristic sources, utilizing a rich visual rhetoric in three forms. The first touches on the visible witness of scripture in connection with debates concerning the presence of Christ’s body in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. The second is connected to the first and concerns debates surrounding the “mark” and “visible form” of the sacraments. The third concerns the duplicity inherent in human sight and the tendency of blindness to masquerade as clear visual perception, a point that

⁵⁶ Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 15.
is employed in critique of the ecclesiology of Calvin’s Roman Catholic counterparts. The
first and second of these are developed as visual metaphors, while the third comes the
closest to a treatment of literal physical vision in the Address.

4.2.3 Illuminating Patristic Manuscripts

In spite of Calvin’s critical comments on the relative obscurity of the early church’s
witness—that within the context of the Address serve the rhetorical purpose of
relativizing church tradition in favor of what Steinmetz called the humanist ideal of
“better exegesis”—patristic teaching still has a positive place. Put simply, according to
Calvin, scripture is the light by which tradition is revealed for what it is. When this light
is cast upon prior teaching, one may find it is in harmony with scripture’s witness, though
this is always open to revision. Similarly, this light may reveal that the teaching is at odds
with the biblical witness, at which point either one’s exegesis or one’s interpretation of
the tradition needs to be reconsidered then refined. Interpretation and theological
construction, then, is fundamentally a matter of response and clarification. Along these
lines, Calvin asks: “Do our adversaries keep themselves within these bounds when they
do nothing their whole life long but bury and obscure the simplicity of scripture by
endless quarrels and more than sophistical questions? So that if the fathers were raised up
alive now and heard this kind of fighting which today our adversaries call ‘speculative
theology,’ nothing would be further from their minds than to consider such disputations
as being of God.”\(^{57}\) According to Calvin, the pursuit of esotericism at the expense of

clarity in theological debate is the first movement in unhitching oneself from tradition, an
act that constitutes, ironically enough, the shedding of “the yoke of the fathers.”

Calvin’s criticism of speculative theology begins where one would expect, with
comments about the necessity of cleansing contemporary worship practice. The
assumption at the heart of his argument is that specious practice flows from specious
doctrine that flows from a kind of “double blindness” on the part of the speculative
theologian. Speculative theology, says Calvin, is unable to attend to the clarity of “the
word of God,” because it is not the word of God with which it is concerned but the
“fixing of constitutions, canons, and magisterial determinations” that, however
individually insignificant they may appear in themselves, build up like a film to cover
what is otherwise clear in itself. As a consequence, the speculative theologian is unable to
properly handle the teaching of the church fathers, teaching that Calvin takes to be more
mixed than the testimony of scripture but nevertheless perspicuous enough to
complement that testimony. Rather than genuinely attending to the most difficult aspects
of the fathers, Calvin argues that the speculative theologian goes “beyond measure” by
contaminating “God’s holy word with sophistical subtleties,” which leads to gross errors
in church practice and piety (outlined below), not least of which are idolatrous forms of
ceremony masked as “true worship.” The task of the reform movement, as Calvin sees
it, is to redress the problematic situation by placing ecclesial practice under the scrutiny
of scripture in dialogue with patristic teaching.

58 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 15.
59 It is worth noting that Calvin equates such speculation with the so-called “Scholastics,” whose doctrine is
summarized in Lombard’s Sentences rather than Aquinas’s works.
60 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 15; cf. my comments in chapter 1 on Carlos Eire’s interpretation of
Calvin’s definition of “true faith” and the reformer’s agenda of purifying late medieval worship.
Citing Epiphanius, a 4th-century critic of the use of images in Christian worship, as well as Ambrose and others, Calvin ridicules his contemporary worship environment as being perilously at odds with the opinions of the fathers. He presents a compact polemic touching on four interrelated issues: the use of images in worship, the veneration of relics, the doctrine of the Mass, especially as it theorizes the “enclosure” of Christ’s body under the elements, and laws concerning fasting and celibacy. “Our adversaries,” Calvin writes, “have removed all these limits when they have rigidly commanded the same thing which one of the fathers punished with excommunication and the other with good reason rebuked. It was a father who affirmed that it is rash to decide either way about something obscure, without the clear and visible witness of scripture.”\(^61\) This recalls his explanation of the \textit{regula fidei}. If something is deemed obscure, then one seeks clarity by following the repetition set forth in the patterns of set out by the rule of faith.

The inherent tension in this claim is obvious: once the authority of church tradition is relegated to secondary status, exegesis, like the interpretation of the fathers, becomes a subjective exercise—no doubt one that can be fortified and tempered by a community of interpretation, but, at least on the surface, subjective. The test for Calvin is, in the end, the witness of scripture in connection with the “internal testimony of the Spirit.”\(^62\)

\(^{61}\) Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 14; emphasis mine.

\(^{62}\) This principle is clearly stated in the opening chapter of the \textit{Institutes}, “Of the Knowledge of God.” Calvin writes: “So if we wish to take good care of consciences so that they are not constantly upset with doubts, the authority of scripture must come to us from higher than human calculation or indications or guesses: that is, we must found it on the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. For even if in its own majesty scripture has sufficient worth to be revered, nevertheless it begins truly to move us when it is sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. So being illumined by His power, we do not believe either according to our judgment or that of others, that the scripture is from God, but above all human judgment we determine without doubt that it was given to us from the very mouth of God by human ministry, just as if we were gazing upon God essence in it.” Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 39; emphasis mine. Calvin does not argue that scripture’s authority derives from itself but rather from something external to it, namely, the operations of the Holy Spirit acting on both scripture and the exegete. For our purposes, it is notable that Calvin here goes so far as to claim that the illumining powers of the Spirit open up scripture in such a way that it is \textit{as if} one is \textit{gazing} on the divine essence.
Gregory comments: “Like Zwingli, both Bucer and Calvin followed [broader humanist trends] more generally in their respective ways: the fathers and ecclesiastical tradition were criticized and even rejected or simply ignored wherever they failed to corroborate a given reformer’s interpretation of scripture.” 63 However, in Calvin’s sweeping treatment of the reformed movement’s controversy with Rome, particularly as it centers on ecclesiological disputes, we get a more nuanced and sophisticated picture of early Protestantism, a treatment couched in rich visual categories that move beyond a dispute simply having to do with differences in rather arbitrary theological and exegetical preference, as Gregory claims.

In short, the debate about interpretation of scripture and the tradition is, for Calvin, ultimately a matter of rival ecclesiologies based on disputes over the question of interpretive authority. In the context of the Address, Calvin couches these ecclesiological differences in visual categories. He suggests that his opponents negligently emphasize outward visible authority, while the reformed movement takes as its point of departure the “hidden” and “invisible” testimony of the Spirit that contravenes and calls into question that which is outward and visible. Calvin’s comments on the “clear and visible” witness of scripture stand in an ironic relationship with what he takes to be the ecclesiology of his Roman opponents. That is to say, Calvin charges his adversaries with

63 Brad S. Gregory, The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 96. Gregory’s assessment of Calvin’s use of patristic exegesis in connection with contemporary biblical interpretation misses the rich communal dimensions of the model Calvin develops here: the church fathers, like the contemporary exegete, are in constant conversation with scripture, and the theologian’s task is to help moderate this argument; indeed, scripture itself is in constant argument with patristic doctrine and contemporary exegesis, such that “authority” is not vested in only one party but evacuated to the movements of the Spirit that are to be discerned through prayer. This is a far more robust understanding of doctrinal argument within the tradition than the model of exegesis Gregory criticizes. To be sure, it is a more robust, albeit quite different, understanding of doctrinal argument within the tradition as classically (i.e., hierarchically) conceived. In other words, Calvin moves beyond a simplistic binary between “communal” and “subjective/individualist” interpretation.
obscuring what is otherwise clear (scripture), while failing to acknowledge the opacity of that which they take to be perspicuous (the church and its teaching authority).

4.2.4 Visible and Invisible Things

In his analysis of the basic issues that divide the reform movement and Rome, Calvin begins by distinguishing between two approaches to ecclesiology, one that “requires a visible and observable form of the church” established “in the form of the seat of Roman church and in the estate of bishops” and another that holds “the church can exist without visible appearance.”64 Whereas the former requires outward visibility as a prerequisite for the claim that the true church exists in the world (Roman), the latter refuses to understand the church’s presence and persistence in terms of its external manifestation (reformed). For Calvin, strictly speaking, the church on earth cannot be identified with a collection of bodies arranged in an ascending hierarchical order, but is marked instead by “the pure preaching of the word of God and the right administration of the sacraments,” acts that do not depend on an ecclesiastical center of power for their veracity, but on the ministry of the Spirit of God.65

Extending this line of argument, Calvin poses the following rhetorical question: “[Our opponents] are not satisfied if the church cannot always be pointed out visibly, but how often has it happened that it was so deformed among the Jewish people that there was nothing visible left?”66 As with its root, Israel, which was slender and often on the verge of extinction, the church in the age after Christ’s coming occupies the same anxious space. It, too, according to Calvin, is often hidden and without visible form,

64 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 16–17.
65 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 17.
66 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 17.
being “so crushed by wars, schisms, heresies, that [at times] it was not visible anywhere at all.”  

If the marks of the church are as variable as the placement and displacement of humans in places of ecclesiastical power, then those marks are like passing shadows—here, there, fading, then gone. Therefore, Calvin reasons, if there is any hope for the church’s persistence, there must be a more constant, stable form that transcends mere materiality, lest one be forced to concede the church frequently teeters on the verge of absolute dissolution. This surer foundation, he argues, is the reign of Christ from heaven in the world witnessed to by the performance and administration of word and sacrament that have the Spirit as their companion. 

Therefore, only insofar as the “preaching of the word and right administration of the sacraments” venture to testify to the work of Christ do they have any efficacy. Left alone—or left to rely on immanent earthly authority to determine their efficacy—they are simply hollow actions.

Clearly, there is a great deal of anxiety on Calvin’s part with identifying the marks of the church with “visible things,” a trope that manifests itself throughout his corpus. Invoking Hilary of Poitiers, he writes, “St. Hilary considered it a great vice in his time that, when people were blinded by the foolish reverence which they had for the episcopal status they did not even think about what plagues were sometimes hidden

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67 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 17.
68 While it could be argued that there are traces of Neoplatonic theory at play here (viz., that the material form of the church emanates from a more ‘real’ invisible form), such an interpretation would fall short of making sense of the full scope of Calvin’s argument. Rather than working from an implicit Neoplatonism, Calvin wants to assert the primacy of Christ’s action in the church through the work of the Spirit that is attested to through proclamation and the sacraments. In other words, the foundation of the ‘true church’ (if we can even use such a phrase in reference to Calvin) is the immanent presence of Christ made available through Christ’s Spirit.
69 For an assessment of how this anxiety emerges in Calvin’s theology of idolatry vis-à-vis the purification of worship, I point yet again to Carlos M.N. Eire, War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197–206. See also section 1.4.2 above.
beneath the masks of the bishops.”

In this sense, plain visibility is a severe limitation for the Christian faithful. In fact, it is something to be distrusted. With respect to the laity, blindness is also serves as a metaphor that correlates with ignorance, either of the self- or externally-imposed variety. This is the first and most basic sense of ‘blindness’ in Calvin’s usage—a lack of understanding concerning that which is good that leads to destruction. On the part of the episcopate, “the mask” points to deliberate, conscious duplicity that is calculated and contrived, unleashed on the laity as manipulative power. Calvin suggests that if the church simply exists at this plain visible level, as a phenomenon whose basic contours can be discerned and exhausted by the physical eye, then the church is in constant danger of fading into nonexistence as it fades from view though the death and departure of its members, a point Calvin believes bears out when one considers the history of Israel and the early Christian church. Put simply, if the reality of the church’s presence is finally left to human power to maintain, as Calvin believes the Roman church holds, and thus for the human eye to discern, then one will inevitably be lead to despair at any and every disruption. Roman ecclesiology, so reasons Calvin, directs the faithful only to see the outward, bare material form of the church, and thus obscures its true ground—the hidden reign of Christ from heaven made tangible through the Spirit.

Calvin’s criticism of Roman ecclesiology also centers on the question of who has the authority to judge the church on earth. “Let us leave judging to the Lord,” he declares, “since He alone knows all His own (2 Tim. 2[9]), and sometimes He also can take away the external recognition of His church from human sight. I confess that this is indeed God’s terrible punishment on earth; but if human impiety merits this, why do we struggle

70 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 17.
to contradict the divine justice?” The possibility of the church becoming hidden and essentially invisible is linked to divine discipline, though not necessarily “punishment” in a retributive sense. Rather, as is characteristic of Calvin’s understanding of divine judgment, it is inextricably bound up with divine grace: “Some generations ago, the Lord punished human ingratitude... because, since they refused to obey His truth and quenched His light, He allowed them with blinded sense to be deceived with great lies and buried in deep darkness so that no form of the truth was visible. Yet still he preserved His own in the midst of these errors and darkness, though they were scattered and hidden.” In other words, while the church may endure periods of invisibility, it will never be snuffed out completely, because it is grounded in the preserving power of God that constantly and faithfully abides, even in those periods when it appears to be anything but faithful companionship. Calvin often speaks of this as God’s paternal care. By contrast, if left simply to human judgment, these periods of invisibility would be treated as the demonstration of abject abandonment and neglect on the part of God, a position that Calvin finds inconsistent with the pattern of God’s electing and preserving activities throughout the history of Israel and early church. In the end, the visibility of God’s people is not the point of divine election and preservation. Rather, election and preservation serve the end of witnessing to God’s reign and paternal care.

When considered within the broader scope of Calvin’s thought, it is important to note that the church is not the exclusive object upheld by the preserving power of God. It is sustained as part of more vast, more fluid forms of social existence that include entities like the family, the political community, and various forms of human and non-human

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social organization, like animal communities that operate in response to the flux of seasons, weather patterns, displacements, and so on. Simply put, the church is cared for as part of God’s larger preservation of the vast cosmos. To continue this line of inquiry regarding Calvin’s description of the human encounter with God, we must consider how he unfolds the relationship between knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Of particular interest is Calvin’s description of how the human creature comes to perceive the order and disorder of created realities, and, concomitantly, how he understands the way in which vision has been injured through alienation from God. Connected to this, we must unfold Calvin’s perspective on the law’s function as one of the divinely ordained means by which the humanity encounters the divine will—even if the law itself remains, like creation, essentially strange to the creature despite its perspicuity—an encounter that is clarified and perfected when humanity comes to behold both creation and law through the mediation of Jesus Christ, who is the middle term between created and uncreated realities.

In the material that follows, then, we move from broad consideration of Calvin’s theological use of basic visual categories as found in the Address to specific instances of visual interest that bear on the dogmatic categories of self, creation, and law. It is here that we will be able to discern the movement between seeing to beholding in Calvin’s theological epistemology.

4.3.1 *Creaturely Visions of the Creator and Creation*

In unfolding the relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of self, Calvin suggests a comprehensive account of these two terms sheds light on the way the
individual and her world are ordered towards the Creator. The deep connection he discerns between these two types of knowledge is made plain in the arrangement of the 1541 *Institutes*, a structure that largely remains consistent, with slight modification, in subsequent editions up through 1559. There, Calvin begins with the possibility of knowing God (chapter 1), then proceeds to topic of self-knowledge and the question of the freedom of the will (chapter 2). For our purposes, it is the rich visual language that Calvin deploys to describe this complex relationship that is of interest. Vision is the primary sense to which Calvin appeals in order to describe the movement from inwardness to being turned out to God and world. To be sure, it is the principal sense through which humanity encounters divine self-disclosure in creation. Words and phrases like “empty appearances,” “glimmer,” “gaze,” “look upon,” “perceive,” “raising of the eyes,” and “blindness” permeate his opening advance into the possibility, conditions, and content of theological knowledge. It will be my task, then, to organize and exposit precisely how such visual categories serve to shape his description of theological epistemology. In doing so, I will attend to the basic question of how theological knowledge grows out of Calvin’s understanding of the revelatory power of creation and law, and ultimately how this knowledge is oriented to the end of “beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

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73 Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French*, 23. Edward Dowey notes that Calvin’s treatment of knowledge of God as having two discrete dimensions, God as Creator (sourced from creation and the “general doctrine” of Scripture) and God as Redeemer (sourced from the encounter with God in Christ), was not fully developed until the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, though it was present in nascent form in earlier editions. Given that I am here dealing with the 1541 French edition, I will not attend to this distinction, and so will emphasize that the knowledge of God Calvin has in view in the opening chapters of the 1541 is that of God the Creator. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 43–44.

74 Mary Potter Engel places special emphasis on the relationship between Calvin’s anthropology and his doctrine of creation. Couched in the language of humanity as “world” and one of the objects in which God contemplates God’s works, she points to his thirty-ninth sermon on Job as one of the places he highlights
4.3.2 God-knowledge, Self-knowledge

In Chapter 1 of the 1541 *Institutes*, Calvin describes the plain availability of God’s revelation as manifest in the structures of the world. However, due to radical corruption and humanity’s alienation from God, this knowledge is darkened such that we are, says Calvin, compelled to turn away from God and retreat into ourselves, thus directing every thought and action away “from the order of our creation.”

The guiding axiom with which Calvin begins is found in the opening lines of the *Institutes*: “The whole sum of our wisdom which is worth calling true and certain is practically comprised of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” He goes on to contend that this twofold knowledge, which forms the content of Christian wisdom, ought to be fundamentally extrinsic (ek-centric) in its orientation. In other words, the pursuit of God-knowledge vis-à-vis self-knowledge must be sourced from a place beyond ‘the self.’ “For, since there is a world of misery in people,” Calvin writes, “we cannot look closely at ourselves without being struck and pierced with the knowledge of our misery, so that we immediately raise our eyes to God and reach at least some knowledge of Him. Thus by the feeling of our insignificance, ignorance, futility, indeed our perversity and corruption also, we recognize that the true greatness, wisdom, truth, the deep links that hold between humanity, the greater created world, and God. Calvin declares: “God, in a matter of speaking, looks at himself and contemplates himself in men; it is not without good reason that he regards all that he has made and finds it good. It is the case that man is the principal and most excellent work there is among creatures, for God wanted to display in him that which he placed in only small portions in the heavens, the earth, and in all animals. He did this in such a way that man is said to be a little world, since it is there that we see so many admirable things that we are bound to be astonished. Since this is so, we should always be persuaded that God contemplates his work in us, that he will be moved and inclined to be good to us and maintain us.” *Comm. on Job* 19 from CTS; quoted in Mary Potter Engel, *Calvin’s Perspectival Anthropology*, 195. As this passage indicates, Calvin’s understanding of knowledge of self vis-à-vis God-knowledge is neither strictly about the question of knowledge, nor about anthropology, but has to do with his broader doctrine of creation and therefore cannot be isolated from it.

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75 I am here gesturing at Dowey’s distinction between the two forms of knowledge of God in Calvin, that of God as Creator and Redeemer. See Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 205–21.
righteousness, and purity lie in God." Given that despair as a consequence of alienation stands at the center of the human heart (what Willem Balke calls “negative experience” in Calvin), when humans gaze inwardly to contemplate themselves, they are immediately impelled to take to their heels in search of a world not racked with confusion and disorder. This attempt to move outward, beyond the self, is a sort of impulse or reflex, rather than a conclusion deduced from a set of fundamental anthropological principles; it is, as Calvin says, “a sense” or “feeling,” something that we are compelled to do in a fit of horror—like suddenly leaping away from a serpentine shape without taking time to carefully investigate whether the form is actually a venomous serpent or harmless, discarded piece of rope.

But if the basic situation in which the human finds herself is that of inescapable “perversity and corruption,” how then is she to recognize that, as Calvin suggests, something like “the good” and “righteousness” exists, and that it is God for whom she longs and in whom alone the good can be found? Put differently, how can one know what goodness looks like, that it is even available, if all they know is its opposite—despair derived from utter perversion? As Calvin admits, “It is not easy to discern which of the two [knowledge of self, characterized by corruption, or knowledge of God, characterized by an orientation to the good] precedes and produces the other.” Therefore, the struggle to articulate knowledge of the one entails a struggle to articulate knowledge of the other.

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79 Balke writes: “Calvin has a double understanding of experience. On the one side there is the engagement with the Word which leads to the certainty of faith and salvation; on the other, the various experiences taking place in times of despair and temptation, experiences into which the believer is drawn over and over again through the same Word which had awakened his or her faith…. In such negative experiences the only thing that helps is an uninterrupted attentiveness to the Word.” Willem Balke, “Revelation and Experience in Calvin’s Theology,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 357.
Similarly, the struggle to identify the source from which one derives entails a struggle to identify the source of the other. To further complicate the matter, it would appear these two types of knowledge could not be more profoundly at variance with one another, and yet Calvin is adamant they are intertwined at a fundamental level, each being the condition of the possibility of its counterpart.

As he delineates the dynamic between God-knowledge and self-knowledge, Calvin emphasizes that the starting point in the pursuit of theological knowledge is that of basic self-awareness that begins with divine prompting. “Each of us,” he writes, “is not only prompted to seek God by the knowledge of himself, but also guided and practically led by the hand to find Him.” Moreover, “A person never comes to the clear knowledge of himself unless he has first contemplated the face of God (la face de Dieu), and afterward descended to consider himself.”81 Here we hit upon quite the predicament, for according to Calvin one cannot pursue contemplation of God’s face before first considering who they are before this God, namely, a creature lacking in all good such that they must flee elsewhere to find the basis and source of the goodness and righteousness they lack. But this recognition does not yet qualify as theological knowledge; it is only an encounter with two mutually incompatible realities, the disordered self and the strange God. It is not clear, then, how Calvin thinks one is to come to a “clear knowledge of himself,” given his insistence that knowledge of God is necessary for but denied to the subject at this initial moment of self-encounter.

But the problem runs deeper still, for more often than not the human will consider herself to be the measure of true knowledge and perfection. Following Augustine, Calvin

81 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 23.
is keen to emphasize that self-love is our basic posture towards the world. So long as this is so, we will persist happily along in a state of unacknowledged deception but instantly be seized, Calvin says, with “religious fear and terror” whenever God’s presence is sensed (sentent la presence de Dieu). And so we come to see that the drive towards knowledge of God does not simply emerge from an encounter with one’s own misery. One is also confronted from the outside—from a sense of divinity that can only be interpreted as judgment when it shows up, leading to religious fear and terror. This, I think, points to a basic moral concern in Calvin’s doctrine of theological knowledge—that one’s orientation towards oneself is fundamentally a matter of the orientation of one’s worship, or who this God is who confronts us extra nos. If we take ourselves to be the final measure of knowledge, goodness, righteousness, and so on—in Calvin’s view, a standard human assumption—then the self will inevitably become an object of veneration. Is there any way to escape this, to break free from this basic impulse towards self-love and self-worship? Put differently, if we are mired in perversity without recourse to the good, then how are we to come to what Calvin will eventually call “true theological knowledge,” key components of which are rightly ordered worship and a

82 The Catechism of the Church of Geneva provides a concise summary of Calvin’s perspective on self-love. In response to the question of what is comprehended under the command to “love God,” the catechumen replies: “As we are naturally so inclined to love ourselves, that this feeling overcomes all others, so love of our neighbor should so rule in us, that it govern us in every part, and be the principle of all our purposes and all our actions.” The Catechism of the Church of Geneva that is a Plan for Instructing Children in the Doctrine of Christ in Calvin: Theological Treatises, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 117.

83 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 24; the verb Calvin uses here is sentir (“to feel”), which carries with it the sense of tacit awareness or immediate intuition, rather than connaître, which he regularly uses to indicate the goal of knowledge of God, which is intimacy that goes beyond mere facile acquaintance.

84 As Dowey rightly puts the matter, “The knowledge of God in Calvin’s theology is never separated from religious or moral concern. More exactly, it is never separated from the answer that man gives through worship and obedience when God reveals himself. Whether discussing encounter with God in creation or Scripture, Calvin always uses the term ‘knowledge’ in conjunction with the love or hatred, mercy or wrath of God, as well as man’s total response in trust or fear, obedience or disobedience.” Dowey, The Knowledge of God, 24.
proper understanding of ourselves before God and within the structures of creation?

These questions shape Calvin’s exploration of the possibility of theological knowledge by way of encounter with God in creation.

4.3.3 God-knowledge through the Divine Works

In order to illustrate the dilemma sketched above, Calvin deploys a striking visual analogy. He writes:

“Just as the eye which looks at nothing but black-colored things judges something that is a poor white color, or even half-gray, to be the whitest thing in the world. It is also possible to understand better how much we are deceived in our measure of the powers of the soul, by an analogy from physical sight. For if in broad daylight we look down at the earth, or if we look at the things around us, we think that our vision is very good and clear. But when we lift our eyes directly to the sun, the power which was evident on earth is confounded and blinded by such a great light, so that on we are obliged to admit that the good vision with which we look at earthly things is very weak when we look at the sun.”

Drawing on Plato’s allegories of the cave and sun, Calvin invokes the notion of spiritual ascent (i.e., moving from lower, earthly things to higher, astral things) and distinguishes between higher and lower forms of vision, physical sight, on the one hand, and what we may call spiritual insight (what Calvin calls the “powers of the soul”), on the other.

Embedded in these higher and lower forms of vision is a further distinction between types of visual ability: the weaker and stronger. Weaker vision simply gazes at finite things and is satisfied with contemplating them simply as they present themselves (or appear to be given). Rather than ascending to contemplate the source from which they derive, weaker

85 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 24.
86 This parallels Calvin’s account of the two degrees of blindness, one that is the result of ignorance and native stupidity grounded in the corruption of human nature; the second that is the result of an untrained gaze, i.e., encountering divinity without the proper acclimation. Blindness as the result of native stupidity runs parallel to bare physical vision, while blindness as the result of failed acclimation runs parallel to the treachery of spiritual visual power.
vision is content to “rest on us or other creatures,” without striving to move beyond the form of the thing presented.\textsuperscript{87} Stronger vision, by contrast, strives to ascend “upward” in order to encounter that which lightens and enlivens all things, making them perceptible, shedding light on their unity in plurality. But in an odd twist, as soon as this upward turn is made, stronger vision, in virtue of its impulse to move beyond things as they present themselves, finds itself confounded as it is forced to reckon with its inherent weakness. It can be called “stronger vision,” then, only because it seeks to move beyond the type of gaze that merely “rests on other creatures.”

Critical to the visual metaphor developed here is Calvin’s suggestion that when the eye has perceived only darkness, even the muddiest, most opaque gray will be mistakenly taken as “dazzling white,” an error resulting not so much from the failure of perception as from one’s experience (or inexperience) of light. Similarly, he suggests that when the eye is cast out over the illumined form of the world, the viewer will assume her visual capacities are quite strong, as if this ability to ‘see’ simply occurs on account of her native abilities. If and when the eye is turned upward to gaze at the sun, the true source of earthly light that makes perception possible, the eye is immediately overcome with a blinding brightness. In this moment of reckoning, vision that was once thought to be strong, capable, and clear is shown to be weak, incompetent, and devoid of strength. It is the opposite of vision, in fact, and can only be characterized as a species of blindness.

In this important passage, we meet one of the foundational images that Calvin utilizes to describe the fraught nature of the soul’s capacity to perceive the revelation of God. However, this analogy between physical sight and spiritual insight is extended, taking a slightly more positive turn, just a few sections later in the chapter. Calvin

\textsuperscript{87} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 27.
suggests that “no matter which way you turn your eyes, there is no part of the world so small that at least some spark of His glory does not shine there.” And he goes on:

“Particularly you cannot look around and contemplate this beautiful masterpiece of the whole world, in its breadth and width, without (in a manner of speaking) being completely blinded by the infinite abundance of light.”

Calvin brings together the infinity of God’s revelation, characterized as the outpouring of diffuse, effulgent light, with the finitude of creation, characterized as a sort of self-contained work of art. It is the divine light that discloses creation’s beauty and coherence, and so by encountering the edifice of the world humanity is in a position to encounter something that exceeds the world, the divine infinity.

To this he adds another visual metaphor, one of his favorites, that of the mirror-like quality of creation that reflects that which is otherwise invisible to us. It is fitting, he says, that creation be called “‘the mirror of things invisible,’ because the arrangement of the world serves us in place of a mirror, to contemplate God who is otherwise invisible.”

In contrast to the previous visual analogy, which emphasized a strictly negative form of blindness brought on by our encounter with the world, this is largely a positive account. For despite the fact that the eyes may well be blinded by the infinite light of divinity spread throughout “the masterpiece of the world,” the eyes are

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88 The passage in its entirety reads: “God willed the chief goal of the happy life to be the knowledge of His name; so that it would not appear that He wants to exclude any from entering that happiness, He reveals Himself clearly to all…. He engraved in each one of His works certain signs of His majesty by which He offered Himself to be known by us according to our small capacity…. Although His essential being is concealed from us, nevertheless His powers which are continually visible before our eyes show Him in such a fashion as is necessary for us to know Him. No matter which way you turn your eyes, there is no part of the world so small that at least some spark of His glory does not shine there. Particularly, you cannot look around and contemplate this beautiful masterpiece of the whole world, in its breadth and width, without being completely blinded by the infinite abundance of light.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 30; emphasis mine.

89 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 30.
nevertheless opened to God, wounded by divine light—indeed, even the eyes of the ignorant stand to perceive something of divine self-revelation in this regard, namely, Calvin says, God’s eternal power and divinity.\textsuperscript{90}

However, this encounter with divinity as manifest in creation does not finally count as theological knowledge.\textsuperscript{91} It remains, strictly speaking, what we have characterized as an encounter. Let us consider Calvin’s remarks on this. He writes:

\[\text{[God] reveals Himself clearly to all. For since he is by nature incomprehensible and hidden from human understanding, He engraved in each one of His works certain signs of His majesty by which He offered Himself to be known by us according to our small capacity—such notable and obvious signs that every excuse for ignorance is taken away from the blindest and the most naive people in the world. Therefore although His essential being is concealed from us, nevertheless His powers which are continually visible before our eyes show Him in such a fashion as is necessary for us to know Him for our salvation.}\textsuperscript{92}

He continues, “[Even those] who have only the unaided sight of their eyes cannot be ignorant of the superiority of the divine wisdom; it offers itself to be easily recognized in the variety of stars, which are so numberless and well ordered, so it is certain that there is no one to whom God does not sufficiently make known His wisdom…. Nevertheless in

\textsuperscript{90} Note that we are firmly within the frame of knowledge of God the Creator. Dowey comments: “[A human] owes his creation and his redemption to the gratuitous love of God. Yet he owes his need for redemption to his sinful rebellion against God’s orderly rule in creation, and he discovers that salvation consists in Christ’s obedience, justification, and sanctification, which accomplish the removal of guilt and the re-establishment of that orderly rule. The two sides are inseparable: the special, gratuitous quality of God’s mercy and the orderly universal inclusiveness of law…. The relation of the knowledge of God the Creator to the knowledge of God the Redeemer remains a dialectic one, or…a double presupposition. Each presupposes the other, but in a different way: (1) The redemptive knowledge must be seen to have come from God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the same God to whom Scripture points in the natural order and the moral law, whom Scripture describes as the Triune Creator and Sustainer of the world…. (2) The knowledge of God the Creator comes only to those illuminated by the Spirit in faith, although the knowledge of faith, properly speaking, is not God as seen in his general creative activity, but as seen in the special work of redemption in Christ. Thus, the knowledge of God the Redeemer is an epistemological presupposition of the knowledge of the Creator.” Dowey, \textit{The Knowledge of God}, 238–39.

\textsuperscript{91} The most thoroughgoing treatment of the issue of the intersection of divine revelation and its availability in creation (with special reference to christology) in Calvin’s theology is Peter Wyatt, \textit{Jesus Christ and Creation in the Theology of John Calvin} (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1996). See especially Chapter 4, “Jesus Christ and the Knowledge of God from Creation.”

\textsuperscript{92} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 30.
the eyes of the whole world the human body has such an ingenious arrangement that its Maker deserves to be accounted amazing.” Divine wisdom and power, Calvin says, is readily available throughout creation, manifest in the astronomical order of which the human body is a sort of microcosm, what he calls “the brightness of [God’s] majesty as fashioned in His creatures.” The vast cosmos and human body are discrete ‘signs’ of the divine works, such that humanity “cannot open [its] eyes without being obliged to witnesses to these proofs.” Given the perspicuity of these signs, Calvin concludes, “There is no need to make a long and involved demonstration in order to bring forward witnesses which illumine and prove God’s majesty…. It is clear they are so well known and come to the fore everywhere you turn that it is easy to mark them with the eye and touch them with the finger.” In other words, the marks (or ‘proofs’) of divinity are so plain, so near to us, that they can be known through the most basic of creaturely perceptual capacities—vision and touch. And yet we consistently fail to see these marks of God.

Nevertheless, it is at this point that we begin to get a sense of what counts as the bare minimum requirement for theological knowledge in Calvin, what he calls “knowledge by experience.” He goes onto contrast this experiential knowledge, manifest in the divine works experienced through the senses, with speculative theology, or “attempting by audacious effort to examine in detail the grandeur of [the divine]

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93 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 31.
94 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 36.
95 Elsewhere Calvin emphasizes the unity of the divine works, writing, “[It] must be confessed that in each of the Lord’s works, but especially in the whole multiplicity of them, His power and virtue are represented as if in a painting by which the entire world is called to the knowledge of God, and through that to the enjoyment of the highest joy.” Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 34.
96 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 31.
97 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 33; emphasis mine.
essence.”98 This knowledge by experience is described in visual terms, characterized as
the eyes being opened “[to look] upon Him who is the true God,” which should lead to
one being “satisfied to have [God] as He reveals Himself, always being carefully on
guard not to go beyond His will by presumptuous insolence.”99 It is what Calvin calls
catching a glimpse of “the glimmer of truth” that leads one to “meditate on God’s
majesty.” However, this flicker of truth is constantly at risk of being “hidden and
quenched so that it does not lead to the right knowledge,” yielding only “knowledge that
there is some divinity,” or just some brute, impersonal power that exceeds the cosmos.100
Therefore, what Calvin describes as the beginning of theological knowledge ultimately
fails to deliver knowledge of God. “Such knowledge ought not only to move us to honor
and serve God, but also incite us to hope for the life to come. For because we perceive
that the marks of His mercy and severity which our Lord offers are only halfway and
partial, we must recognize that they are like a glimpse of what will someday be plainly
revealed on the appointed day.”101 To be sure, “despite some light with which we may be
enlightened by the contemplation of God’s works which represent both Him and His
immortal kingdom, our spirit is so carnal that we see nothing of these evident
testimonies—no more than if we were blind. As for the universal arrangement of the
world: how many of us raise our eyes to the heaven or indeed, when looking at all the
regions of the earth, remember the Creator? Do we not instead, leaving the Maker behind,
stop short with contemplating the creatures?”102 According to Calvin, then, the revelation
manifest in creation that should lead to the higher contemplation of God, and to

98 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 33.
99 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 29.
100 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 27.
101 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 33; emphasis mine.
102 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 34.
meditation on the unity of the divine works, will finally descend into corruption under the
reign of the flesh, as “we abandon the one true God in favor our lying imaginary
creations.”103 (We note again that corrupted vision—the failure to behold the divine
works—is described as a turn inward.) Moreover, these passages portend a move that
Calvin will make later in the Institutes, where he highlights the inextricable connection
between revelation and faith. For example, in Chapter 4, “Of Faith, Where the Apostles’
Creed Is Explained,” Calvin writes that coming to ‘see’ the things of God is to reckon
with the fact that “these things are higher than can be grasped by our senses or seen with
our eyes or touched with our hands until the last day when the full revelation will be
made; and that meanwhile we do not possess them otherwise than in rising above every
ability of our spirit, and raising our understanding above everything in the world, and
finally rising above ourselves, [the Apostle Paul] adds that this is the assurance of things
which consist in hope and for that reason are not visible.”104 In other words, it is faith that
rises above the brutal experience of the material world, and thus serves as the means by
which the revelation of God can be truly known.

In the end, apart from faith, the knowledge of God manifest and available in
creation ultimately succumbs to human carnality and sloth. It is not on account of some
diaphanous quality of the revelation that a breakdown in our knowledge of God occurs.
Rather, the breakdown occurs on account of human weakness. Humanity merely ‘sees’
creation and therefore fails to ‘behold’ the revelation of God. In the event of ‘seeing,’

103 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 34.
104 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 195. See Barbara Pitkin, “From Fiducia to Cognitio,” in What Pure
Eyes Could See: Calvin’s Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1999), 9–40.
knowledge of God slips away with the passing glance. Calvin summarizes the problem thusly:

For as soon as we have conceived some little taste of the divinity by contemplation of the world, we abandon the true God and set up dreams and imaginary things from our own brains in place of Him, and transfer to them God’s righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and power. Moreover we so obscure His daily works, or we overturn them by misjudging them, that the praise and grace which is owed to Him because of them is stolen and taken away.105

Here the familiar theme of idolatry comes into view—the corruption of divine revelation, described as misperceiving then bending the works of God to the whim of the imagination. This ushers in the problem of disordered worship, humanity imagining God other than God offers Godself, stopping short of contemplating the Creator by being satisfied with contemplating mere creatures. In response, Calvin contends that divine intervention is necessary, a word from without that leads to illumination. Again previewing the necessity of faith that is developed later in the Institutes, he writes:

It is evident God used His word with those whom He wanted to instruct fruitfully, because He saw that His form and image which He had imprinted in the edifice of the world was not sufficient, we must walk by this path if we desire with a good heart rightly to contemplate his truth. We must, I say, return to the word in which God is shown very well and painted as if living by His works, when these are considered not according to the perversity of our judgment but according to the rule of eternal truth. If we turn away from this word, no matter how quickly we go, we will never arrive at the goal because we are not running the path. For we must take into account that the light of God which the apostle calls ‘inaccessible’ is for us like a labyrinth to lose us unless we are led through it by the directing of the word, so that it is better for us to limp along in this path than to run quickly outside of it.106

A crucial point in all of this is the insistence that the divine essence is essentially invisible (that “light of God” that is “inaccessible”) and cannot be seen by the physical eye.

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105 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 36.
106 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 37.
Indeed, although God is available to be seen—really seen—in the mirror of creation, the
divine essence always exceeds creation’s capacities, as well as the ability of the physical
eye to perceive. Even still, Calvin insists that the divine image is inscribed on the
structure of the world, offered as a “living image” that is present but that we persistently
fail to perceive. Even the patriarchs of Israel, he says, who often encountered divine
revelation through visions and dreams, did not encounter God as God is in se, but the
works of God that were as shadows and “obscure rays.” Therefore, despite the fact that
God stoops to us, offering Godself to be known through the divine works revealed in and
through material means, humanity remains at the level of encounter, sense, and feeling.
Humanity remains the creature to which God accommodates Godself. 107 This is
summarized in two crucial concepts: the sensus divinitatis and semen religionis. Briefly
attending to these concepts will highlight why, in Calvin’s theological epistemology,
mere sense or feeling will not quite get us to true or final knowledge of God.

4.3.4 The Sensus Divinitatis and Semen Religionis

Calvin deals with the problem issued in by humanity’s failure to perceive the marks of
God in creation prior to and apart from direct divine intervention through the categories
of the sensus divinitatis and semen religionis. As we have seen, he wants to maintain
that all humans know something of God, however incomplete and fragmentary this
knowledge may be. He writes:

Let us take it as beyond doubt that there is in the human spirit a natural
inclination, some feeling of divinity, so that no one may hide by
pretending ignorance. The Lord has breathed into all people some

107 See Arnold Huijgen, Divine Accommodation in John Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment
understanding of His majesty, so that all, when they have heard that there is a God and that He is their creator, may be condemned by their own testimony for not having honored Him and devoted their lives to doing His will…. Those who seem not to differ from brute beasts in any other aspect of life nevertheless always retain some seed of religion, so that this universal concept has taken root in every spirit and is fixed in every heart. Since from the beginning of the world there has never been a region or city or even a house which could do without religion, we have a tacit confession that there is a sense of divinity engraved in the hearts of all people.108

Appeal to the seed of religion allows Calvin to say two things. On the one hand, it holds humanity culpable, for all humans, Calvin is convinced, are compelled to worship something, though the vast majority persist in misplaced reverence and devotion. Calvin develops this line of thought by alluding to Romans 1:21, where the Apostle Paul write: “For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.” On the other hand, it serves to teach fear of and reverence toward God as humanity comes to understand, however imperfect it may be, that God is the benevolent Creator to whom all gratitude and thanksgiving is owed.

Carlos Eire has argued that Calvin’s theology of the semen religionis and sensus divinitatis establish him as first ‘anthropologist of religion,’ and this quite by accident.109 On Eire’s reading, these concepts give Calvin the tools to construct a declension narrative that describes a consistent pattern of what should be true worship descending into gross idolatry. As Calvin says, “Even idolatry gives us ample grounds to think [that there is a sense of divinity engraved on the hearts of all people], for we know how a person abases

109 Carlos M.N. Eire, “John Calvin, Accidental Anthropologist,” in John Calvin and Roman Catholicism: Critique and Engagement, Then and Now, ed. Randall C. Zachman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 145–63. Eire’s own account relies on a reading of Calvin’s polemical tract, John Calvin, De fugiendis impiorum illicitis sacris, et puritate religionis observanda (1537), though he does touch on the relevance of the sensus divinitatis and semen religionis as the hook on which human culpability hangs. Thus, the anthropological point is that the impulse for religion springs from human nature itself.
himself in spite of himself and honors other creatures at his own expense.”[110] This is to say that the seed of religion “is so corrupted that it only produces bad fruit, and so here we sin chiefly in two ways. The first is that, to see God’s truth, wretched people do not rise above their nature, as would be fitting, but they measure His greatness according to the weakness of their senses. They do not understand Him at all as He has given Himself to be known, but imagine Him as they have made Him by their presumption.”[111]

And yet the *semen religionis* persists as “a universal concept [that] has taken root in every spirit and is fixed in every heart.”[112] Even a creature as unabashedly warped as the Roman emperor Caius Caligula, says Calvin, could not escape the divine presence or “wipe out the memory of God” from his understanding.[113] In short, the seed of religion persists as a vestige of knowledge of God in the midst of radical corruption. “Thus even the most wicked,” Calvin writes, “are an example to us that throughout the world the knowledge of God has some power in the hearts of all people…the first seed which can never be torn away: that is, the knowledge that there is some divinity.”[114] There is a deep Augustinian logic to Calvin’s theology of the *sensus divinitatis/semen religionis*: no human, so long as she has bare life, is so polluted as not to know something of God. Even the most radical evil cannot, in the end, squelch this knowledge.

However, we note that the power of this knowledge is only partial and finally incomplete. It is dimmed sight, turbid vision waiting to be clarified. The closing sections of the opening chapter of the 1541 *Institutes* provide a sustained meditation on what is required for this knowledge to be made whole. In a remarkable series of passages, Calvin

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delineates three things must come together for the knowledge of God to be made complete: illumination by God’s Spirit in order that God’s Christ may be seen in the letter of the law. I cite the following passages in full, which narrate this sequence.

Referencing the Apostle Paul’s battles with his adversaries mentioned in the Corinthian letters, Calvin writes:

It is plain enough that…St. Paul is fighting against those tricksters who exalt the bare law without Christ, turning people away from the grace of the New Testament where the Lord promised that He will engrave the law on the bowels of the faithful and write it in their hearts. God’s law, then, is a dead letter and kills His disciples, when it is separated from Christ’s grace and so only rings in the ears without touching the heart. But if by the Spirit of God the law in imprinted in living fashion on the will and if it communicates Jesus Christ to us, it is a word of life, converting souls, giving wisdom to the lowly.\textsuperscript{115}

The law vivifies when the Spirit of God, who reveals the grace of Jesus Christ therein, inscribes it on our innermost parts. Calvin continues: “This does not contradict at all what we said…about the word being scarcely certain for us unless it is proved by the witness of the Spirit. For the Lord brought together a mutual tie, the certainty of His Spirit and of His Word, so that our understanding might receive the word obediently, seeing the Spirit shine in it—the Spirit who is like a brightness to make our understanding contemplate the face of God in the word, so that without fear of trickery or error we might receive God’s Spirit, recognizing Him in His image, that is, His word.”\textsuperscript{116} Moreover, by a special grace the faithful have “set before their eyes” the divine powers that “shine forth in the heaven and the earth: that is, mercy, goodness, compassion, righteousness, judgment, and truth.”\textsuperscript{117} But do these divine attributes that are manifest in the universal form of the world finally describe the content and goal of the knowledge of God? No, not completely,

\textsuperscript{115} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 43.
\textsuperscript{116} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 44; emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{117} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 45.
says Calvin. In words laced with visual reference, he brings the argument to its culmination: “Because God does not offer himself to be contemplated directly and up close except in the face of His Christ, who can only be seen with the eyes of faith, what remains to be said about the knowledge of God is better deferred to the place where we will talk about the understanding of faith.” It is to the vision of faith, exhibited in the face of God’s Christ—what I have called the movement from seeing God in creation to truly beholding God in Christ—that I now turn.

4.4 Christ, the Middle Term Between God and World

In his classic study of Calvin’s early theology, Alexandre Ganoczy suggests that a uniquely christocentric vision fundamentally shapes the reformer’s soteriology. Drawing on Ganoczy, Barbara Pitkin notes that three elements come together to compose this so-called christocentric focus: first, synonymy between ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘kingdom of Christ’; second, an unswerving commitment to the exclusivity of Christ as the only mediator between God and creation (it is this emphasis in which we are particularly interested here); and, finally, a participationist anthropology cum soteriology

118 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 46. This concluding statement from Calvin corresponds to Augustine’s discussion of healing the eye of faith by beholding Jesus Christ. Augustine writes: “[Jesus] had just said before, Whoever sees me also sees the Father. But Philip did not yet have a whole and healthy eye with which to see the Father, and thus not one either with which to see the Son himself who is coequal with the Father. And so the Lord undertook to heal and strengthen the still enfeebled focus of his mind, that was unfit to gaze on so bright a light, with the medicines and lotions of faith, and he said, Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me? So anyone who cannot see what the Lord is going to demonstrate should not ask first to see what he is to believe, but should first believe, so that the eye may be healed with which he is to see…. How, then, are our eyes healed? Just as it’s by faith that we perceive Christ passing by in his temporal activities, so we have to understand him stopping and standing still, as Christ in his unchanging eternity. The eye is healed, you see, when it understands Christ’s divinity. Your graces must try to grasp this; pay attention to the sublime mystery [grande sacramentum] I am speaking of.” Augustine, Sermon 88.4, 14, in Sermons III.51–94 on the New Testament, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 1991).

expressed in the phrase ‘in Christ,’ where the faithful find salvation exclusively in union with the life-giving flesh of the Son of God.\textsuperscript{120} To this Julie Canlis adds: “For Calvin, the figure of Christ has shattered any scheme that begins with creation and allows creation to be considered apart from Christ, through whom it was made and to whom it is directly.”\textsuperscript{121} In other words, in the final analysis, the knowledge of God available in creation cannot be properly seen, and thus known, apart from the symbol of Christ. To put things more starkly, nothing of God—neither God’s works nor God’s essence—can truly said to be known apart from the mediation of Jesus Christ.

The visual character of Calvin’s theological epistemology comes to full expression in an argument concerning the necessity of faith rising above the bodily experience of the world. This argument emerges in Calvin’s explanation of the Apostles’ Creed, where he describes the content of theological knowledge obtained by faith. He writes:

> Although we may trust that the character of faith is clearly shown when it is directed to the gospel as its goal, nevertheless it is necessary to ask what faith ought principally to consider in that gospel. We have briefly touched on this in showing how the summary of the gospel is contained in Jesus Christ. For by that we wanted to indicate that all the promises are not only included in Him but also show forth in Him…. What must be known about the Father is not seen except in the Son; for the Father dwells in inaccessible light but pours out the splendor of that light on us by His Son. He is invisible not only to the eye but also to the understanding; nevertheless in His Son He gives us His living image to contemplate. That is why the apostle puts the illumination of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{122}

In this arresting passage, a distinction is drawn between divine visibility and invisibility.

For Calvin, the essence of God (God \textit{in se}) is hidden from view. It exceeds not only our

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Pitkin, \textit{What Pure Eyes Could See}, 10–11.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Julie Canlis, \textit{Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension} (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 44
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 196; emphasis mine.
\end{itemize}
visual but also our intellectual capacities. And yet Calvin is clear that God is available to be known. The problem of the excess and invisibility of the divine being is overcome by Christ’s mediation. It is Christ who is offered as “the living image of God” that is placed before our eyes so that we might contemplate God. Christ, then, is rightly “called the light of the world,” says Calvin, and the one who “makes know the splendor of the divine glory to the people.” And this is so because “Christ is the splendor of the glory of His Father and the living image of his substance.” The very essence of God, in itself inaccessible and invisible, is made manifest in the flesh of Jesus, who is the living icon of God, the one through whom the glory divine being is radiated. Moreover, as light of the world, Christ shows forth the works of God active in creation.

Calvin contends that the true knowledge of God (the knowledge of faith) means coming to a true knowledge of God’s mediator. “It must be understood,” Calvin writes, “that we should not seek the Father, who is invisible, in any way except in Jesus Christ who is His image.” It is here that Calvin’s doctrine of faith contrasts with the logos-centrism of figures like Luther and Zwingli, who both, to varying degrees, tended to emphasize divine hiddenness and the utter invisibility of God that in turn required proclamation (‘imageless’ representation) as the chief means by which the revelation of God was known. Where Luther and Zwingli were inclined to understand Christ as word (a designation that Calvin has no trouble utilizing), the Genevan reformer highlights the iconic qualities of God’s revelation in Christ, which he describes as the eyes of faith beholding the glory of God in the image of Jesus Christ.

124 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 197.
For Calvin, the Apostles’ Creed presents the clearest explanation of what it means for faith to gaze upon the essence of God in Christ. “In order to have a perfect explanation of faith,” he writes, “we must have before our eyes what there is in Christ which pertains to confirming our faith. For when we know its matter and substance it will be easy to understand all its nature and character, as in a painting. The Apostles’ Creed will take the place of a painting for us; in it the whole dispensation of our salvation is so expounded in all its parts that there is no single point omitted.”\(^{125}\) But what does this painting reveal in the simplicity of its parts? This painting reveals two things, says Calvin, one visible and the invisible. The invisible parts are manifest through the visible, but nevertheless remain invisible. These include the power of God (\textit{dunamis Theou}), the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and other “spiritual things which are not seen with the eye.”\(^{126}\) These are the articles that are not ‘believed’ on account of their visual veracity, but on account of the power of God confirming them by the Spirit in the believer. Juxtaposed with these invisible things are Christ’s nativity, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven that were all, Calvin suggests, “visible to human sight.” However, these articles are not to be left to themselves as events trapped in some bygone past. Their meaning is to be found in their pertinence to present existence, and the goal of faith is to discern the story they tell, the “purpose and reason” for which they stand. Calvin illustrates this by appealing to the crucifixion, which he says reveals God’s benevolence towards us due to Christ’s atoning work, and the resurrection, which is the seed of hope of our own immortality. Again, these visible realities reveal invisible promises grounded in God’s

\(^{125}\) Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 197.

\(^{126}\) Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 198. Calvin appears to address literal physical vision here.
unchanging essence. This is what Calvin means for God’s mediator to be a “living image” that is set before our eyes.

4.5 The Possibility of Unmediated Sight: Notes on 1 Corinthians 15:24

Controversy surrounds the question of Calvin’s perspective on the nature and necessity of Christ’s mediation in the eschaton. The debate concerns whether or not Christ’s humanity is eternally required for creatures to know God or if his humanity is only necessary for knowledge of God in the present age, which remains tainted by sin and corruption. While we cannot solve Calvin on this issue, we can describe some of the tensions at the heart of the question and offer a tentative proposal that draws on the foregoing analysis.

As we have seen, the reformer is clear that Christ, both in the event of Incarnation and according to his resurrected body, serves to mediate knowledge of God in and to the world. As E. David Willis comments, “Calvin subjects…the idea of mediation to two different nuances: mediation as reconciliation and mediation as sustenance…as sustainer, the Mediator always was the way creation was preserved and ordered.”127 This recalls the familiar trope of Calvin’s christology organized around the concepts of Christ as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Going beyond Willis, Edwin Van Driel notes another strand of interpretation that suggests Calvin understands the Word as cosmic mediator, the “conduit of God’s creating and sustaining of that which is not God, a role fulfilled by the eternal Word independent of his incarnation in time.”128 Standing in contrast with

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128 Edwin Chr. Van Driel, “‘Too Lowly to Reach God without a Mediator’: John Calvin’s Supralapsarian Eschatological Narrative,” Modern Theology 33, no. 1 (April 2017): 276. Van Driel cites Edmondson on this point, where the latter writes: “We find in the Institutes an elaboration of the mediatory involvement of the Son from the beginning of God’s work, as the conduit whereby God pours God’s grace out upon the world, in the assertion of the Son’s involvement in the creation and providential care of the world.”
interpreters like Willis and Edmondson is the line of explanation charted by Jürgen Moltmann that suggests Calvin understands there to be a point at which the eternal Son will “retreat into the Trinity,” so that “the man Jesus enters the host of the redeemed,” leading “into immediacy with God” on the part of those who have been perfected.\(^{129}\) As Richard Muller notes, Moltmann’s comments are directly informed by the work of Heinrich Quistorp, who was one of the first to suggest that Calvin conceived of Christ’s humanity as receding “into the background” following the final judgment and subjection of all things to God.\(^{130}\)

As has already been noted, Calvin does not provide a systematic statement on eschatological sight, otherwise known as the beatific vision. However, scattered throughout his writings are suggestive comments, the most controversial of which is his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:24, the passage over which Willis, Edmondson, Quistorp, Moltmann, and others contend. In a chapter that offers an extended meditation on the resurrection life of Christ into which redeemed humanity is called, the Apostle Paul writes in verses 20–25:

> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

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Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 144. The more rigorous ‘Barthian’ interpretation of Calvin on this point shows up in Julie Canlis’s explanation of the Christ-ordered nature of creation, and Christ’s role in mediating created and uncreated nature. See Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 71.


In this compact statement, Paul offers a picture of world history that begins with the all-encompassing pollution of corruption inaugurated by the sin and death of Adam that is overcome in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Issuing from the resurrection of Christ is the possibility of “the end,” the point at which death will finally be put to death as “those who belong to Christ” are unveiled as part of the termination of history. On this Calvin comments:

But Christ will then restore the kingdom, which he has received, that we may cleave wholly to God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity, because a way of approach will then be opened up, from which our infirmity now keeps us back. Thus then Christ will be subjected to the Father, because the veil being then removed, we shall openly behold God reigning in his majesty, and Christ’s humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God.¹³¹

Offered here is a radically monotheistic vision of the world to come, whereby all that is, described as a kind of cosmic kingdom (basileian), is perfected in light of Christ’s work, and thus united to God as a final act of “subjection.” At this moment, Christ will hand over all things to the Father, which ushers in the perfection of humanity, opening up the possibility of a “closer” vision of God to be had by virtue of the fact that the veil of infirmity will be fully and finally disposed of. On a plain reading of Calvin’s commentary on the text, as Richard Muller notes, “1 Corinthians 15:24–28 provides an important key to the understanding of Calvin’s Christology, insofar as it describes the purpose and end of Christ’s mediatorial rule. Christ’s kingly office, the manus regium, must terminate in the eschaton, since the office belongs not to the divinity of Christ in se but to the divine-human person of the Mediator.”¹³² The two fundamental questions that open up are these: based on his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, does Calvin envision a point at which

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¹³¹ Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 15:24 from CTS.
¹³² Muller, “Christ in the Eschaton,” 32.
the humanity of Christ will no longer be necessary for mediating between God and creature? Similarly, does Calvin understand the eschatological beholding of God as an event that binds humanity so closely to God that God will be seen “immediately,” rather than in “mediate” fashion?

To step back from the text in question for a moment, as we have seen throughout our examination of Calvin, he is first and foremost a biblical interpreter and makes every effort to follow the grain of the text, subjecting theological construction to the patterns of scripture. While he has strong theological predilections—for example, a positive view of Law, the privileging of the Spirit as bond of union, and, as is immediately relevant here, emphasizing the necessity of materiality in mediating God to humanity according to humanity’s bodily capacities—at times these are disrupted because of a wrinkle or difficulty in the text. 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the most challenging texts in the New Testament, not least because of the ambiguous anthropological distinctions that Paul delineates coupled with the highly speculative eschatology. Calvin’s distaste for speculation is challenged when he faces 1 Corinthians 15:24.

As we have seen, there is a strong emphasis in Calvin on Christ’s bodily mediation that arises by virtue of our created capacities. This is evident, for example, when he reflects on the passage from the Apostles’ Creed, “The resurrection of the flesh; life eternal,” commenting, “After the resurrection...we will retain the substance of our body but the quality will be changed.”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 265.} This suggests that the physical bodies we now have are in continuity with the bodies that we will enjoy in resurrection life, and, indeed, stand in a substantial relation with the resurrection body of Christ, the glorified body to

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\item \textit{Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 265.}
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which humanity will be conformed. Although the bodies in the eschaton will be of a different “quality,” namely an immortal quality that stands in contrast to the body of death with which we presently struggle, their “substance” will neither be lost nor destroyed. For Calvin, there is no disembodiment in the age to come. Such a comment would challenge, or at least condition, how we think about his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:24. Standing in continuity with his comments on the Apostles’ Creed is an interesting statement from his explanation of the Lord’s Supper in the 1541 French Institutes, where 1 Corinthians 15:24 is cited in support of the admonition that “We must hunger only for Jesus Christ, seek Him, look to Him, learn Him, keep Him, until that great day comes when our Lord will clearly manifest the glory of His kingdom and show Himself openly to be seen by us as He is.” Casting Christ as the object of this eschatological vision, the explanations offered by Quistorp and Moltmann of the recession (or coming irrelevance) of Christ’s humanity in the eschaton appear inadequate, or at least skewed due to their near exclusive reliance on the commentary material.

Calvin holds that death belongs to the order of sin, while the body belongs to the order of nature. Or as van Driel nuances the point, Calvin’s christological vision is that the Incarnation derives from the onslaught of sin, while Christ’s mediation is an eternal reality of relating all that is not God to God, calling it up into an eschatological journey

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134 As Calvin comments on 1 Corinthians 15:50: “What I have said as to bearing the image of the heavenly Adam means this—that we must be renewed in respect of our bodies, inasmuch as our bodies, being liable to corruption, cannot inherit God’s incorruptible kingdom. Hence there will be no admission for us into the kingdom of Christ, otherwise than by Christ’s renewing us after his own image. Flesh and blood, however, we must understand, according to the condition in which they at present are, for our flesh will be a participant in the glory of God, but it will be—as renewed and quickened by the Spirit of Christ.” Calvin, Comm 1 Corinthians 15:50 from CTS.

135 Calvin, Institutes: 1541 French, 581.

136 See Calvin’s comments on the gift of the body and its subsequent ruin by Adam, leading to the curse of death in Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 15:44–48 from CTS.
into the divine life. Applying this to the questions raised by 1 Corinthians 15:24, in the age to come when resurrection life is realized, death will fade from view because it no longer stands in the way of relationship with God. Thus we can infer that when the Son is subjected to God the Father after all things have been delivered to the Son, what has been subjected to the Son is not the order of nature, but the order of death. If the body belongs to the order of nature, which originates as and persists as gift, then it does not follow that at the moment of eschatological unveiling that creatures, anymore than Christ himself, will have their bodies canceled or subsumed into the divine essence. What is destroyed is death reigning in the body, and what remains is the glorified body that is made able fully able to see God. Therefore, in the moment of eschatological unveiling creatures will be perfectly related to God as embodied creatures empowered by the life-giving Spirit himself, Jesus Christ. As Calvin writes:

The Spirit of God...dwelling in us is life, but we still carry about with us a mortal body. The substance of death in us will one day be drained off, but it has not been so yet. We are born again of incorruptible seed, but we have not yet arrived at perfection. Or to sum up the matter briefly in a similitude, the sword of death which could penetrate into our very hearts has been blunted. It wounds nevertheless but without any danger, for if we die, but by dying we enter into eternal life. As Paul teaches elsewhere, as to sin, such must be our view as to death—that it dwells in us but does not reign...We must observe that all power was delivered over to Christ, inasmuch as he was manifest in the flesh...the Father has exalted him in the same nature in which he was abased, and has given him a name before which every knee must bow.

Calvin goes on to critique the proposal that the full unveiling of God in the eschaton leads to “a vanishing and dissolving into nothing” of all things; against this, he contends that all nature will be rightly ordered to God precisely as nature with Christ at its center, that is, “it will be brought back to God, as their alone beginning and end, that [all things] may be

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137 Van Driel, “‘Too Lowly to Reach God without a Mediator,’” 282.
138 Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 15:27 from CTS.
closely bound to him.” It is difficult to see how this entails the loss of bodies—created bodies of any kind—that would arise from the radical dissolving of all things into God.

To close these reflections, as the greater sweep of Calvin’s comments on the body, both created and glorified, indicate, it appears that he views Christ’s glorified body as persisting in the age to come. Be this as it may, whether this means that Christ’s bodily mediation falls away in the eschaton remains a point of dispute. However, it may be that there is simply diversity in Calvin on this point and that harmonizing his thought is simply not possible.

4.6 Conclusion

In his explanation of the myriad ways that humanity can come to know God, Calvin begins by emphasizing the indissoluble unity that holds between knowledge of God and knowledge of self. The theological epistemology that he develops includes on a range of visual categories and images that are used to describe the rich and varied ways that divine revelation confronts humanity. Visual concepts are also used to express the movement from blindness to sight, ignorance of the divine to intimate knowledge of God as creator and benevolent caregiver. The movement from sightlessness to sight comes as a result of God granting renewed vision to the eyes, transforming vision so that God can be encountered in the things that are made. Though we did not delve into the intricacies of this topic, we note that Calvin’s emphasis on the supremacy of divine action in this complex is of a piece with his broader soteriology.

To restate the sequence of our analysis, this final chapter started by introducing the seeds of a theology of vision in the 1541 Institutes by focusing on the matter of visual

139 Calvin, Comm. 1 Corinthians 15:28.
error in the prefatory Address to King Francis I. Calvin suggests that the nature of false religion can be understood as an error of the eye—the eye mistakenly looking upon those things that are not divine as if they were divine, which leads to all sorts of calamity (i.e., his polemic and apology is infused with oblique references to the fundamentally idolatrous nature of the worship and teaching of his Roman opponents). Advancing this attack on his adversaries, whom he identifies as both the ‘false teachers’ of late medieval Roman Catholicism and the ‘fanatical’ radical reformed of Protestantism, Calvin contends that they prey upon the weak by veiling the truth with falsehood (i.e., they ‘wear the mask’ and obscure the clarity of true religion), deliberately misleading those they have been tasked with caring for and spiritually nurturing. Calvin’s conclusion at the close of the Address is that the Christian religion in 16th-century France is in the pathetic situation of the blind leading the blind, and therefore the reformed movement abroad, with which Calvin identifies, is to be understood as bringing renewal and new light to a dark and unhappy situation.

With this material from the Address in place, we then considered the visual cast of self-knowledge and knowledge of God from the opening chapter of the Institutes. We traced Calvin’s description of the way in which humanity’s inherent weakness, exacerbated by radical corruption diffused across the mind, heart, and body, leads to the fragmenting of the knowledge of God as Creator and Sustainer of all things. For Calvin, the problem of the breakdown in theological knowledge derives from the wounding nature of sin, which mortally injures both the eye and the understanding. According to Calvin, in the state of corruption we literally cannot see the beauty of God reflected in the mirror of creation, and thus do not properly understand God, trading knowledge of the
infinite for worship of the finite. The problem, then, is neither the availability nor the clarity of divine revelation, but the total corruption of our sight and understanding that impedes our coming to know God as God offers Godself.

While Calvin holds that even in spite of sin humanity still catches glimpses of the divine in creation, these experiences are brief, transitory, and finally unreliable, because we only happen to see God in fits and starts. And yet God has not left humanity to wander in blindness. In Calvin’s exposition of the knowledge of faith, he describes how divinity has accommodated to human capacity in the Mediator, Jesus Christ. Wounded vision is healed as the Spirit grants new eyes of faith, leading them to behold God where Christ is, who, in turn, grants us a new vision of the world, a world beheld in faith, where the kingdom of God that has been coming into the world is seen as if for the first time. As Calvin puts it:

Since we cannot approach Christ unless we are drawn by God’s Spirit, so also when we are drawn we are completely swept up above our understanding. For the soul illumined by Him practically receives a new eye to contemplate the heavenly secrets, although their splendor previously blinded our sight. The human understanding, being enlightened by the light of the Holy Spirit, then begins to taste the things which pertain to the kingdom of God, things of which it could not previously have any feeling…. For the faithful soul recognizes the presence of God without possibility of doubt and, in a manner of speaking, by a touch of the hand, there where the soul feels itself brought to life, illumined, saved, justified, and sanctified.\textsuperscript{140}

To see God, then, is to know God, and to know God is first to behold the divine beauty disclosed in the face of Christ, and then be led back to contemplate divinity in the mirror of creation. The “new eyes” enlightened by the Spirit thus enjoy a strange but fresh vision, one that beholds the divine glory in the Mediator, who discloses the selfsame glory displayed in the things that are made. Thus the various “lively images” of God

\textsuperscript{140} Calvin, \textit{Institutes: 1541 French}, 189, 207.
broadcast throughout creation are properly comprehended when seen through the lens of God’s Christ. Creation no longer impedes knowledge of God by posing the threat of idolatrous misuse, but is comprehended as it is—a true and proper witness to the divine works, a witness whose integrity is grounded in Christ “in whom all things hold together.”

The reformer’s use of the visual in his theological epistemology is thus characterized by a pessimism concerning humanity’s ability to see and know God in the state of sin. This anthropological pessimism, however, is countered by a description of the Spirit’s activity in opening the eyes of faith to the knowledge of God disclosed in Christ, who, as Mediator, shows that all things have been reconciled to God and are maintained and upheld by God’s word. It is to this paternal care that all creation testifies. As Calvin wrote, commenting on Colossians 1: “Christ is the beginning, the middle, and the end…. It is from him that all things must be sought; not is or can be found outside of him.” The paternal goodness manifest in the revelation of God’s Christ thus sheds light on the paternal goodness manifest in God’s works throughout creation. To this general summary of the chapter, we add the following comments.

1. In contrast to his medieval counterparts, who, drawing on strands of patristic thought, held that an unmediated vision of the divine essence was possible in the life to come, Calvin contended that an unmediated vision of God is not possible on account of the essential invisibility and hiddenness of the divine essence. With the older tradition, he agreed that God offers Godself to be known visually. However, this vision is always a mediated one, offered to humanity not directly but through Christ, who is the only intermediary between God and world. Repudiating a speculative model of contemplation

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141 Calvin, *Comm. Colossians* 1:12 from CTS.
of the divine, Calvin grounded the vision of God in the mediating work of Christ, in whom divinity is pleased to dwell but is not circumscribed.

2. Calvin’s theological epistemology focused on clarifying the various ways that God reveals Godself to humanity. His discussion of the knowledge of God centered on three fundamental elements: divine presence within the human self, divine self-disclosure throughout creation, and God’s self-manifestation in Jesus Christ. Both the internal world of the human and the external world of creation clearly testify to God as Creator and Sustainer. However, on account of human finitude and the mortal wound of sin, knowledge of God is corrupted and obscured. Humanity is thus a disordered reality that at once longs to see and know God on account of the *semen religionis* but is unable to do so. In the desire to see and know God, humanity routinely misuses created things by treating them as if they were divine. This pathetic situation is relieved when the Spirit, who turns humanity outside itself to contemplate the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, heals the eyes of faith.

3. With this healing comes newfound clarity with respect to the knowledge of the divine. Apart from the work of the Spirit reordering our relationship with God, the sense of God’s presence, says Calvin, only invokes terror. But when the Spirit brings new life to the eyes and revives vision such that the eyes of faith are made to rest on the risen and glorified Christ, knowledge of God’s paternal goodness is granted, which counteracts the fear that flowed from the state of disorder. To contemplate God in Christ is thus a function of a renewed and restored relationship, a mutual beholding wherein humanity comes to see itself as loved by God according to the divine embrace of creation through God’s Christ. In turn, Christ, as “living image of God,” sheds new light on the knowledge
of God available throughout creation. Creation becomes a source of true knowledge of God—no longer a source of terror but of comfort.

4. To bring these final reflections to a close and place them in conversation with the overarching argument of the dissertation, I make one final observation. Calvin’s descriptions of the Spirit’s activity in moving us from terror at the sight of God to knowledge of our reconciliation with God in Christ (by bringing the eyes of faith to rest on Christ) completes the movement from merely seeing incomplete visions of the divine to truly beholding God as the father of Jesus Christ and the benevolent Creator and Sustainer of the created order.
Coda

From Seeing to Beholding:

Calvin and the Theological Aesthetics of Encounter

1.1 General Summary

This dissertation has presented an account of what I have called a ‘theology of vision’ in Calvin. Recognizing that the reformer has been routinely mischaracterized as one fundamentally antagonistic towards all things visual, at the most general level, I have shown that, though never systematically organized in his work, Calvin in fact offers a robust theology of vision that neither reflexively rejects nor uncritically embraces the visual as theologically productive. His negative posture towards vision begins with concerns over the human tendency to treat created things as if they were themselves divine. Grounded in the suspicion that the eyes are easily deceived and can be led astray by our inborn corruption and natural inclination to misuse created things, this negative posture is best characterized as anxiety over the specter of the idol, the dead image: the divine thought to be imprisoned in creation, and then worshiped as such.1 Calvin, however, also conceives of a positive, constructive place for the visual. According to the reformer, the transcendent God deigns to be known—truly encountered and thereby known—through created things, as God has offered a variety of living images and visual marks that testify to the divine goodness. The divine works are manifest throughout

1 Jeremy Begbie offers a helpful summary of Calvin on idolatry, highlighting that the problem is not creation per se, but the totalizing effects on sin on the human creature: “For Calvin the core tragedy of idolatry is that it entails a denial of God’s presence, and with it a refusal to live as creatures, to live in humility and gratitude coram Deo. Calvin’s repeated assault on idolatry is not driven by a concern to distance God from created reality (in a kind of abstract transcendence, as if creaturely reality was intrinsically fallen), but by a concern to restore a proper understanding of creation’s relatedness to God.” Jeremy Begbie, “Shifting Sensibilities: Calvin and Music,” in Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40.
creation, always available to be seen by those with eyes to see. In more focused ways, God manifest Godself before the eyes of Israel in the prophetic oracles and is shown forth in the sacramental symbols that display the living image of Christ before the holy fellowship. For Calvin, there is no doubt that God offers Godself visually to be known, and indeed there is no place we can turn where some visual mark is not present.

For the sake of clarity, the categories of ‘seeing’ and ‘beholding’ were imposed in order to marshal a theology of vision drawn from three major sections of Calvin’s corpus: the biblical commentaries, the eucharistic tracts and treatises, and the 1541 French edition of the Institutes (with occasional reference to the 1559 Latin). Though each of these major components had a range of different interests and concerns—some highly determined and others more eclectic and expansive—taken as blocks one can detect a consistent movement when read with visual interest: Calvin begins by laying out how visual encounters with the divine are frustrated by human finitude and exacerbated by human corruption, but come to be transmuted as the Spirit works to build up this weaker vision, enabling the eyes of faith to ascend to behold the divine glory found in Jesus Christ, who mediates a comprehensive vision of God in relation to all things.²

² To spell this out as clearly as I can, the seeing-beholding schematic has turned up the following conclusions. (1) Although the prophets saw God through oracles, these visions were partial, remaining essentially obscure, as they anticipated the fuller unveiling of God in the person of Christ, the one to whom the apostles bore witness as they beheld him openly in the flesh. (2) In the case of the sacraments, the materials of bread, wine, and water do not in themselves show forth divinity, and if one imagines that God is contained in the elements, such that God is seen in them by virtue of their subduing of divinity, then one only ‘sees’ and risks turning the sacramental reality into an idolatrous fixture. However, when the sacraments are understood as participating through the Spirit in the reality of the glorified Christ, then the eyes of faith properly behold the material in relation to God, as the eyes of faith are lifted up to gaze upon the living promises found in Christ. (3) With respect to creation itself, God has placed in it diverse visible testimonies (or “lively images,” as Calvin occasionally calls them) to the divine glory. When these visible testimonies are experienced in isolation from the true knowledge of God (i.e., experienced in the state of corruption) then they are merely ‘seen’ and this ‘seeing’ produces two problematic responses on the part of the subject: the living images are either worshiped as if they were God (or treated as talismanic), or their power is misunderstood as inherent and so great that fear racks the one who experiences them. However,
This theological rendering of visual activity spans the scope of Calvin’s corpus, and thus is sufficiently complex so as to emerge as a broad pattern that encompasses both physical sight and spiritual insight. Susan Schreiner puts it well when she says that for Calvin:

As the human soul is gradually restored to...the original order characteristic of the image of God, so too the believer returns to that originally intended activity: namely, the contemplating of God’s revelation written in the book of nature and revealed in the visible splendor of the world. As the perceptual breakdown caused by sin is healed through the Spirit and Scriptures, nature regains its revelatory function as a mirror, a painting, and a theater of divine glory.

The divine glory that the eyes of faith enjoy is made present to the physical eye in the grandeur of creation. In the flesh of the Messiah for which the prophets longed to see and to which the earliest apostles testified, in the ordinary elements that, by the Spirit, are empowered to manifest the wounded and glorified Christ before the eyes of the faithful, and in the vast cosmos that—though it appears as if in a state of perpetual deterioration—is ultimately shown to be the arena in which God’s glory and paternal care is shown forth—in each of these the nature of divinity and the divine works are set forth to be seen, felt, and contemplated.

Calvin on the visibility of God is rooted in the conviction that the divine essence is essentially invisible to the physical eye and mysterious to human understanding.

Balanced against this is the counterpart conviction that God has not left humanity to

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when these things are understood in relation to Christ, the Redeemer and Mediator who manifests the true knowledge of God, then vision becomes reordered such that God can be beheld in creation without risk of worshipping creation as if it were God. That is to say, we are made able to behold God in the mirror of creation through the living, glorified image of God in Jesus Christ.

3 We reiterate that ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ vision are not so much different modes of seeing as they are designations of different degrees of intensity with respect to visually comprehending the divine.

wander in a labyrinth devoid of light but has offered a variety of illuminating images—preeminently “the light that enlightens all”—such that through visible things we are instructed in the proper understanding of the invisible reality. Calvin is clear that divinity must be mediated through forms suited to our material circumstances (hence his frequent appeals to the doctrine of accommodation), though never such that materiality domesticates divinity. For Calvin, God remains God, the living one who confronts us absolutely, and so humanity stands in a position to encounter the visual revelation of God rather than simply experience it as a reality reducible to (or alongside) the finite terms of the world. This is expressed, to briefly revisit the point, in Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments: the sacramental symbols do not “show forth” Christ by “tearing Christ out of heaven” and splaying his body out on the altar; rather, as symbols they participate, by the Spirit, in the living reality of the resurrected and glorified flesh of Christ, thereby becoming spiritual nourishment. By the Spirit, the eyes of faith are directed from mundane things upward to behold Christ where God is. The vision of God, truly manifest in the material symbols, always exceeds the material things themselves. It is in this Spirit guided movement that physical vision is drawn into that of the spiritual.

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6 We note Calvin’s explicitly iconoclastic comments on the danger of human representation of divinity: “We believe it wrong that God should be represented by a visible appearance, because he himself has forbidden it (Ex 20:4) and it cannot be done without some defacing of his glory. And lest they think us alone in this opinion, those who concern themselves with their writings will find that all well-balanced writers have always disapproved of it. If it is not right to represent God by a physical likeness, much less will we be allowed to worship it as God, or God in it. Therefore, it remains that only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God's majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representations.” Calvin, *Institutes: 1559 Latin*, 1.11.12. Thus we can render these comments intelligible by noting that the problem is not representation itself, but the artificer of representation. For Calvin, God alone determines images of the divine, but as the foregoing analysis has shown, this does not mean that creation is devoid of such images or that God does not make Godself visually available. The antidote to idolatry is not necessarily destructive iconoclasm, but humanity being satisfied with the superabundance of icons that God has given. As we will touch on below, this satisfaction is evidenced when humanity comes to be an artificer of worship directed to God.
Calvin’s perspective on visuality and high view of the visual’s capacity to place the divine before the eyes of humanity opens up intriguing paths of inquiry for theological aesthetics. While Calvin himself obviously did not construct a programmatic statement on ‘theological aesthetics’ due to his location in intellectual history, what I have outlined above presents an opportunity to offer a few brief comments on a distinctively ‘reformed’ account of ‘the visual’ for theological aesthetics.

1.2 Remarks on a Reformed Theological Aesthetics of Encounter

To offer some brief closing reflections on how this theology of vision in Calvin intersects with theological aesthetics, I would like to characterize the vision of God qualified by reformed theological commitments in the following way. Retrieving a strand touched on in the introduction to this dissertation, I want to highlight the reformed commitment to preserving the otherness of God in the face of creation and with respect to creaturely perceptive faculties. When divinity is made visually manifest to humanity, it is best understood as an encounter that envelops the creature, initiating her into the life of God, wherein a new form of subjectivity is constituted. The encounter is thus primal in the sense that it calls the creature to recognize that her present life and final end are both upheld and preserved by the one who creates and sustains. This new subjective form is grounded in Christ, the one who mediates the primal encounter as the living image of God, who is also the ground of renewed humanity. Christ’s suffering and resurrection bring the life of God into correspondence with the suffering existence of the world, and this is the content of the image. In this way, God is not an object to be experienced alongside other things, but is encountered as the one who calls the creature beyond itself,
beyond death and into the freedom of new life, as the creature is conformed to the cruciform image of the Son.

Growing out of this emphasis on divine alterity and the creature’s encounter with it is equal, if not greater, attention to the creaturely response—worship, broadly construed. As Calvin was keen to stress, creaturely reality cannot not worship in the face of manifest divine glory. The human creature’s creative response to the vision of God is productively and constructively ordered when, as Calvin and the greater trajectory of the reformed tradition would have it, it emerges as doxological life lived in thanksgiving and humility. To gloss an Augustinian sentiment, true worship arises when all good things in this world, which is to say all things, whether ‘natural’ objects or those manipulated by human hands, are loved and enjoyed in relation to God. To comprehend all things in relation to God is to live a life of responsive gratitude that sees the world not as overcome by the wounded, resurrected, and glorified Christ, but as witnessing to the vitality shown forth in his glorious image—life calling out to its sustaining source, in a way.

This vision of God manifest in the image of Christ is not to be contemplated disinterestedly, for it is not autonomous or independent of relations. Rather, it is a productive image in that the Spirit works to conform all things according to their particularity to it. The Spirit does not harmonize created life with the life of God through the integrative principal of christology, but brings creation into contact with the divine life by ushering it to its proper end—fulfilling its role as that which is specially made to

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7 Thus the oft-quoted remark from Calvin: “There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.” On the provenance of this quote, see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 134–35.
openly testifying to the God who is pleased to be known by God’s creatures. The worshipful response in the present is also a testimony to those things that are near and yet presently far off, held in God’s good future, what some of the earliest Christian writers called the kingdom of God coming into the world.

This understanding of encounter with God establishes divine revelation as an event that prevails over any created artifacts, their histories, and their makers. This is the ‘affective’ quality of the visual encounter: the event as something shocking and unexpected, captured, for example, in that moment when the prophet can only declare in the face of the divine showing: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5) Thus I agree with Richard Viladesau’s characterization of reformed theological aesthetics as having at its core divine revelation rather than metaphysical speculation, such as in Balthasar’s return to a more classical metaphysics to revive discourses on the beauty (pulchritudo) of God in response to what he takes to be modernity’s amnesia with respect to it. This reformed emphasis is grounded in a desire to preserve the ‘an-otherness’ of God—the idea that though God is unremittingly present to be known and visually encountered, this revelation is not finally circumscribed in the world of things. This means that when God is seen, the divine being is neither captured by mediating entities nor is human perceptive structures capable of fully mastering the

9 Along these lines, then, Balthasar’s claims that Protestant aesthetics severs an epistemic connection between God and world and upholds a vision of creation as only indirectly pointing to God’s perfection and beauty must be called into question. On Balthasar’s critique of Protestant aesthetics, see Lee Barrett, “Von Balthasar and Protestant Aesthetics: A Mutually Corrective Conversation,” in Theological Aesthetics after Von Balthasar, ed. Oleg V. Bychov and James Fodor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 103.
vision given. Therefore, the form of revelation “is reckoned with as a unity of identity and nonidentity, simplicity and multiplicity, and therefore includes the creature,” even as it moves the creature outside and beyond her self (ek-stasis).\textsuperscript{12}

This reformed theological description of divine revelation’s affect has several upshots. Let me touch on two, one having to do with the intersection of sacramental theology and aesthetics, and the other having to do with the integration of moral theology into aesthetic discourse. First, a distinctively reformed account of the ‘sacramental potential’ of creation that preserves its created integrity alongside divine revelation’s excessiveness could potentially be constructed. Construing creation ‘sacramentally’ is not an approach typically associated with reformed thought, because of the tradition’s commitment to guarding against mingling or conflating uncreated divine being with the created being of the world.\textsuperscript{13} This in addition to its criticism of the Roman Catholic tendency to understand divine grace as drawing nature beyond its natural capacities in order to (only then) manifest the divine.\textsuperscript{14} Drawing on the foregoing analysis, however, a reformed account of creation’s sacramental potential might argue that the unity-in-plurality issuing from the Spirit’s work in enabling creation’s aggregate doxology means that all things, by virtue of their particularity, are empowered to testify to, and thereby show forth, the divine nature. By making claims regarding the sacramental structure of creation, one would not, therefore, be making a claim regarding the continuity (or

\textsuperscript{12} Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics}, 27.
discontinuity) holding between created and uncreated being. Rather, one would be offering a description of creation’s capacities to fulfill its given telos—attesting to the God who is absolute and stands beyond. While this suggestion may be less than satisfying for those who wish to explore a deeper coordination between God and creation with respect to sacramental doctrine, it seems to me that this basic outline is faithful to the implications of (at the very least) Calvin’s sacramental theology as it intersects with aesthetic considerations broadly conceived.

Second, some scholars working at the edges of reformed thought and aesthetics, such as William Dyrness, have drawn a distinction between aesthetic theories that begin with an anthropological starting point and those explicitly theological accounts that begin with God as the source of ‘aesthetic sense.’ Reformed thought has largely pursued the latter, a theocentric approach to theological aesthetics. Dyrness suggests that whereas high modern aesthetics, growing out of the Kantian tradition, begins with subjective perception as the measure of aesthetic judgment, the greater part of the reformed tradition has proceeded with God at its center, conceiving of the order and goodness of objects as issuing from an order established and sustained by God.15 To extend Dyrness’s point, with reference to the conviction that any genuine encounter with the divine through created things results in the de-centering of the creature—such that she is moved from encounter to action manifest as some form of worship—it would seem that reformed thought must reject the contemplative model of aesthetics as lacking any way to account for (a) the use and fittingness of aesthetic objects for actual life in the world, and (b) a

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strategy for describing how an aesthetic object ought to be used (in ways not reducible to the vapidity of silent contemplation). The two fundamental questions ever before the reformed thinker considering the question of the capacities and meaning of an aesthetic object are these: How ought we to use objects? And what kind of creatures do we become when we use objects in certain ways and not others? These are moral questions rather than ones strictly having to do with aesthetics as such, the moral task deriving from the conviction that humanity encounters God in creation at every turn, and as a result is confronted with the demand to respond: will the object be treated as shuttered off from the world and loved on account of its aesthetic virtues? Or will it be loved and enjoyed in relation to the God who created and sustains it? These are questions that the contemplative model of aesthetics is neither interested in nor altogether capable of answering. While the contemplative model helpfully stresses the unique integrity of particular objects, from a reformed perspective it fails to properly grasp the fundamental relational character of the created order, and therefore fails to offer a robust account of the particularity that it seeks to privilege.

To conclude, as the foregoing analysis suggests, a distinctively reformed theological aesthetics seeks to prioritize the relational activities basic to life in the world, which is to say that it seeks to make moral sense of aesthetics—and this on account of the reformed tradition’s proclivity to begin with divine revelation, the calling of the creature into an encounter with the living God, as the first term in divine-human relationship. The relationality basic to creation might be described in sacramental terms, so long as ‘the

sacramental’ is understood as having to do with action, particularly doxological action, rather than as a function of ontology. Along these lines, perhaps Stanley Hauerwas is correct when he suggests, “The moral life is better understood on the analogy of the aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding rather than in terms of action and decision.”17 Or perhaps it is a meeting of these terms, and a moral universe, the space of creaturely action, only opens up when the world is beheld in relation to the God who is conforming all things to the cruciform image of Jesus Christ.

Appendix I
Visual Analogy

Calvin’s wide-ranging use of analogies between doctrines and visual concepts can create difficulties for understanding precisely how visual concepts function in his theology. Wilhelm Niesel’s comments on Calvin’s doctrine of the image of God nicely illustrate the ambiguities that can crop up when one attempts to discern the potential analogical function of visual categories in Calvin’s thought. The problem of the *imago Dei* in Calvin is a well-known one, which Mary Potter Engel attempted to parse out in her important monograph, *John Calvin’s Perspectival Anthropology*.¹ Niesel, speaking of the image as the “divine similitude” in Calvin, offers this statement on the classic doctrine:

> The divine similitude consists not in the fact that man is endowed with reason and will, but in the fact that these faculties in original man were directed wholly toward knowledge of and obedience to God. Thus, Calvin can echo the expressions of the church fathers and say that body and soul are natural gifts which man has received, whereas, the similitude to God, on the contrary, is a supernatural gift. It is superadded to the psychophysical constitution of man and is imparted from the outside.²

On first glance, Niesel’s explanation seems reasonable enough: Calvin’s doctrine of the *imago Dei* claims that the image is a supernatural endowment, not to be reduced to the natural gifts of body and soul. However, questions can be raised that reveal the matter is more complicated than this, and has to do precisely with the visual concept, ‘image.’

According to Niesel’s analysis, is the image of God a substantial, supernatural endowment in humanity that brings it into contact with divine being? Or is the image simply the source of humanity’s “likeness” (*similitudo*) or “resemblance” to God? If the

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image of God is a simile, such that we could say, for example, “The image of God in humanity indicates the human is like God with respect to attributes x, y, or z,” then presumably we are claiming the image only serves the purpose of representation—as a mirror represents the contours of a face, but does not ‘possess’ the face itself or represent it without flaws or distortion. In this sense, the *imago Dei* would point to humanity’s proximate relation to God, underscoring the strict distinction between humanity’s natural endowments and divine supernature—the natural, created endowments being ontologically distinct from simple, immutable divine being.

However, we could also take the analogy implied in the *imago Dei* to be the basis for a stronger form of ontological correlation between God and creature, with the body and soul as natural gifts, and the *imago Dei* being a superadded gift. This would be more in keeping with the plain sense of what Niesel intends to argue. In other words, if we take him to be suggesting that Calvin’s doctrine of the *imago Dei* consists, for example, of the endowment of rationality or freedom in the creature, and that this endowment corresponds to the divine attributes of, say, wisdom or aseity, then he is in effect saying that the image of God serves as the conduit through which certain attributes of God are transferred to humanity. And if this were the case, then it would seem the *imago Dei* is no longer functioning analogically.

Thus the problem that Niesel’s analysis highlights is that it simply is not clear at times how we are to understand certain visual concepts in connection with doctrinal claims, especially when those visual concepts appear to be functioning analogically. By claiming the image-as-similitude is superadded to humanity’s natural capacities, Niesel could be read as suggesting that the *imago Dei* is as basic an ontological reality as that of
the body and soul, even if the *imago Dei* is distinct from these natural capacities in virtue of the fact that its superadded to human nature. And yet it is nevertheless a superadded gift, something additional to natural gifts of body and soul, which all animals, regardless of species distinction, have. Therefore, does the image of God indicate ‘likeness’ to the divine or is it a substantial ontological reality, one that brings created human being into connection with the uncreated being of God? At a broader level, does the *imago De* function as an analogical concept in Calvin or is it a stand-alone theological concept that requires separate treatment.
Appendix II

Visual Epistemology

This appendix provides a definitional clarification. Throughout the study, especially in chapter 4, I have used the term ‘visual epistemology’ when discussing aspects of Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God. Here I use ‘epistemology’ in the typical, most general sense—having to do with an account of how it is we come to know the things that we know. In Calvin’s general usage, epistemology has two broad senses: there are the things that are known through the natural endowment of reason,¹ corrupt though it may be, and there are things that are known through special revelation, mediated preeminently through scripture and Christ.² I use ‘vision’ is a more narrow, explicitly theological sense. With reference to Calvin, I have suggested that vision points to the dynamic flow of physical sight—what I have called mere seeing—into spiritual insight—or what I call beholding—with both physical sight and spiritual insight having God as their proper aim and end. The relationship between these two types of vision is captured in Paul’s declaration that we presently “see through a glass darkly,” and so hope to “one day see face to face,” knowing fully, even as we are fully known. In other words, prior to the full beholding of God in the age to come, we catch glimpses of the divine works in creation only partially, as they are mirrored as in the glass of creation ‘darkly.’ Our visual encounters with God in creation are not ends in themselves, but strive to a fuller vision of divinity at the time of the consummation of all things. Drawing on this saying from 1 Corinthians, Calvin writes: “‘For at many times and in many ways the Heavenly Father formerly spoke through the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken in his beloved

¹ See my analysis of Calvin’s commentary on Rom 2:28–29 in section 2.4.8.1, as well as my analysis of Calvin on the semen religionis and sensus divinitatis in section 4.3.4.
² See section 4.4.
Son’ [Heb 1:1–2], who alone can reveal the Father [Lk 10:22]; and he has indeed manifested the Father fully, as far as we require, while we now see him in a mirror [1 Cor 13:12].”

Although it is ultimately unclear how the present experience of seeing “in a mirror” relates to the clarity of future eschatological vision (Calvin does not explicitly say), these two experiences are not finally distinct from one another. Rather, they are connected in that the present situation of seeing God in the things that are made produces longing, a longing that cultivates hope shaped by faith, a faith centered on one who fully manifests God in the world, Jesus Christ. Thus, the experience of seeing God’s works spread throughout creation and the future event of the divine self-unveiling are two aspects of vision that can be captured under the heading ‘visual epistemology.’

3 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.18.20. The spirit of Augustine is alive in Calvin’s remarks, as Augustine wrote: “Without question, ‘we see now through a mirror in an enigma,’ not yet ‘face to face’ [1 Cor 13:12]. For this cause, as long as I am a traveler absent from you [2 Cor 5:6], I am more present to myself than to you. Yet I know that you cannot be in any way subjected to violence, whereas I do not know which temptations I can resist and which I cannot.” Augustine, Confessions, 10.5.7.
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Biography

Tanner Capps is the son of Susan and Gene Capps. He grew up in Oconee County, South Carolina, where he received his primary education at Oakway Elementary School and secondary education at Oakway Middle and West-Oak High Schools. His primary religious formation took place at Mt. Tabor Baptist Church in Westminster, South Carolina. Following these formative years, he attended Anderson College in Anderson, South Carolina, where he received the B.A. in English and Visual Art with concentrations in painting and drawing. He then attended Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he received the M.A. in Religion with a concentration in theological studies. He wrote the bulk of this dissertation in Laurinburg, North Carolina, where he teaches at St. Andrews University and serves on the session at Trinity Presbyterian Church.