

STUDIES IN EARLY MODERN  
RELIGIOUS REFORMS

# Divinity Compromised

A Study of Divine Accommodation  
in the Thought of John Calvin

Jon Balserek

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## PREFACE

Divine accommodation in John Calvin's thought has yet to receive the attention it deserves. To date it has not been the subject of a monograph-length treatment in any language (this study is the first) and the number of journal articles and book chapters devoted solely to it is small. The present work will, it is hoped, help to fill this lacuna in research on the topic, but additional research is undoubtedly still needed.

Its title probably deserves a comment. The use of the word *compromised* is intended to raise the question of the extent of accommodation's penetration into Calvin's doctrine of God. It aims to suggest the idea that Calvin's thinking on accommodation might possess qualities which push against traditional thinking on the divine attributes. The idea was first suggested by E. David Willis. The present study will aim to expand upon it.

This monograph owes much to the efforts of Emeritus Professor of Patristic and Reformed Christianity, David F. Wright, who, as supervisor, colleague and friend, has offered assistance to me on innumerable occasions and has also demonstrated a level of scholarly excellence in his own work that has been enormously instructive and encouraging. Thanks are also due to a host of others. Thanks must be expressed to Professor Tony Lane, who offered very helpful criticisms of two earlier versions of this work and whose kindness has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. Thanks are also due to Buccleuch and Greyfriars Free Church of Scotland, whose love has been a regular source of strength (particularly Alex MacDonald and Bob Akroyd); to the theology department of the University of Birmingham (particularly Professor David Parker and Dr Philip Burton, whose friendship and counsel have been extremely helpful to me); to New Hope, P.C.A. (Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.); to my family (to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude in so many ways); to Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III and Dr. W. Duncan Rankin (both of whom were enormously kind to me during my time in Mississippi), and to Dr Charles R. Vogan Jr. My wife has been the most wonderful friend, encouragement, teacher and companion to me; it is to her that this study is dedicated. If I can achieve in my lifetime what she has already achieved, I will be happy.

This work contains shortcomings which are, unfortunately, all too apparent. Nonetheless it is an honest attempt to grapple with a concept in Calvin which is worth coming to terms with. May it serve the scholarly community of those who study the Reformation and Calvin, Christians and any who have an interest in the Genevan's writings, and ultimately the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

J.B.

Edinburgh, Scotland

21 February 2006 (the feast day of Saint Paterius)

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The present work is a study of divine accommodation in the thought of John Calvin.<sup>1</sup> It aims to analyze the character of Calvin's thought on accommodation, to give an account of the ways in which it expresses itself in his writings, to probe how it penetrates his thought and doctrine of God, and to relate, to some degree, Calvin's treatment of accommodation to that found in his predecessors and contemporaries. Although accommodation expresses itself throughout the reformer's *corpus*—his Old and New Testament commentaries, lectures, sermons, tracts, treatises and, of course, the *Institutes*—the majority of citations found below will come from Calvin's expositions of the Hebrew scriptures, because that is where accommodation is most often discussed by him. As this is not the first study of divine accommodation in Calvin's theology, it seems appropriate that we begin by considering the scholarly work produced on this theme in the reformer up to this point.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. ASSESSING THE PROGRESS OF RESEARCH SINCE 1952

In the middle of the twentieth century a fourteen-page treatment of divine accommodation appeared in the introductory portion of Edward Dowey's *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*. It is extremely unlikely that anyone realized at the time how significant it was. It was arguably the first treatment of this important motif within Calviniana, and the first of several perspectives on Calvin's thinking on accommodation to arise during that century.<sup>3</sup> Influenced, it seems likely,

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<sup>1</sup> For a broader consideration of divine accommodation in Christian thought, see K. Duchatelez, 'La "Condescendance" divine et l'histoire du salut,' *Nouvelle revue théologique* 95 (1973), 593-621; Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> The present study is a significantly-revised version of the author's Ph.D. thesis, "'Deus humanitus saepe cum suis agere solet: An Analysis of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin'" (unpublished thesis, University of Edinburgh, December 2002). This work of revision has sought to sharpen analysis of the topic and expand its coverage with the addition of chapters seven and eight. Revision of the current chapter has resulted in the inclusion of Hedtke's work, which did not feature in the thesis. For penetrating discussion of scholarly literature on accommodation in Calvin, see, David F. Wright, 'Calvin's "Accommodation" Revisited,' in *Calvin as Exegete: Papers and Responses Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin Studies*, ed. Peter De Klerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1995), 171-190.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 3-17. Though accommodation is mentioned in the modern period in relation to Calvin as early as 1849 by Thomas Myers (John Calvin, *CTS Ezekiel*, 2, 448-51), Dowey's fourteen-page treatment is the

by nineteenth and twentieth century dogmatics, Dowey presented an interpretation of accommodation which reflected the theological milieu of his day.<sup>4</sup> Accommodation was, he argued, fundamentally related to the concept of knowledge (which Calvin's theology 'exalts'<sup>5</sup>), and specifically to the *cognitio Dei*. It helped explain how Calvin's incomprehensible God could be known. More to the point, it explained how this God could reveal himself to his crude and mentally-feeble people; namely, by accommodating the knowledge of himself to their capacity. Dowey's definition of the theme brings this out nicely: '[t]he term accommodation refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.'<sup>6</sup> In expounding this definition, Dowey added precision to it by carefully differentiating between accommodation to human finitude (what he called 'essential' limitations of human nature) and to human sinfulness ('accidental' limitations).<sup>7</sup> This division became the structure for his treatment of the concept. Within that treatment, Dowey focused in the first section upon that knowledge of God which is learned from God's works, and in the second upon the knowledge of God the Redeemer; thus reflecting Dowey's indebtedness to the *Institutes*. With this pioneering treatment, the Princetonian not only introduced his now-classic interpretation of the knowledge of God in Calvin, but also helped the nascent study of accommodation in the reformer to take its first steps.

Before introducing the second perspective, attention should be paid to the 1969 work of Reinhold Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin*,<sup>8</sup> which in some ways adumbrated it. Hedtke addressed accommodation in two sections, one on pedagogy (33-39) and the other preaching (106-114).<sup>9</sup> Under the first of these, he noted the terms Calvin employs to refer to accommodation (*accommodare* and

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first extended discussion. Whether he should be credited with the discovery of accommodation in Calvin is perhaps open to question. Both Ford Lewis Battles and Richard Stauffer in 1977 and 1978 respectively seem to claim this honor for themselves. Both Battles' and Stauffer's studies will be discussed later in this chapter. The truth is that the tribute could go to several authors. See Paul Lobstein, 'La Connaissance religieuse d'après Calvin. Étude d'Histoire et de Dogmatique,' *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 42 (1909), 53-110 (we have been unable to see a copy of Lobstein's essay and mention it on the basis of its appearance in Dowey); Rev. A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin: A Modern Interpretation* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson and Co., 1920), 48, no. 2; and Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor; An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 176-177—nonetheless, Dowey's, as was said, is the first extended discussion of the motif.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Muller 'Directions in Current Calvin Research,' in *Calvin Studies IX: Papers Presented at the ninth Colloquium on Calvin Studies, January 30-31, 1998*, ed. John Leith and Robert Johnson (Davidson, NC: Calvin Studies Society, 1998), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1969). Thanks are due to Dr Josef Boehle for help with the German.

<sup>9</sup> Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin*, 33-39, 106-114 (the endnotes for these sections appear on 170-74 and 203-206 respectively).

*attemperare*) and to human capacity (*ad captum, ad modulum nostrum, infirmitas, ruditas, imbecillitas* and *tenuitas*). He also discussed the ideas, such as anthropomorphism, the will of God, sacraments, and the Incarnation, with which Calvin associates God's accommodating. Following this, he, in a manner similar to what one finds in Dowey, Battles and others, commented on the important place accommodation holds in the reformer's theology, declaring that the accommodation of God and the weakness and capacity of the people is the expression (*Ausdruck*) and centre (*Zentrum*) of God's acting in salvation.<sup>10</sup> This led Hedtke to make several remarks on the consequences of this idea and on the nature of this divine pedagogy, including the nice observation that God is the supreme and only doctor (*summus et unicus doctor*) of the church (a quotation he drew from Calvin's lectures on Micah).<sup>11</sup> This was followed by discussion of the corresponding notions of the *schola Dei, discipuli Dei, schola Christi* and the like as he finished off the section. Under the section on preaching, Hedtke developed ideas on the relationship between the accommodation of God's prophets, his apostles and the doctors and pastors of the church.<sup>12</sup> He also commented on the character and intention of accommodation in preaching. What is especially impressive in this study is Hedtke's engagement with Calvin's *corpus*, which is extremely full, especially given that his treatment of the motif is short. He cites from a range of Calvin's works—commentaries, sermons, selected treatises and the *Institutes*—with roughly 250 citations appearing in the endnotes.<sup>13</sup> Not all of these deal specifically with accommodation, and the *Institutes* features more prominently than any other work, but the effort is still an impressive one.

A second perspective on Calvin and accommodation emerged nearly twenty years after Dowey's work but only a year after Hedtke's in an important paper read by E. David Willis at the American Academy of Religion conference in 1970 and published four years later. This new interpretation conceived of accommodation as associated with divine revelation, as Dowey had, but took a different approach towards the motif. Broadly aligned with the growing interest in the reformer's humanist background inspired by scholars like Quirinus Breen,<sup>14</sup> Willis interpreted Calvin's thinking on accommodation as one of several '[i]nstances of Calvin's Rhetorical Theology.'<sup>15</sup> This rhetorical theology, Willis argued, reflected themes

<sup>10</sup> Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin*, 36, the quote is found on 173.

<sup>12</sup> Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin*, 106-114.

<sup>13</sup> He cites from random treatises as well as Calvin's expositions of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and a number of the minor prophets, three of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark and John), Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John. Although, as we say, the *Institutes* dominates, yet the sermons on Deuteronomy also features prominently.

<sup>14</sup> Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931); idem, *Christianity and Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> E. David Willis, 'Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology,' in *The Context of Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honor of Paul Lehmann*, eds. A. J. McKelway and E. David Willis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 53 (the essay runs from page 43 to page 63). Prior to Willis, see Charles Trinkaus, 'Renaissance Problems in Calvin's Theology,' *Studies in the Renaissance* 1 (1954), 66-67, and Ford