Balancing *Sola Scriptura* and Catholic Trinitarianism: John Calvin, Nicene Complexity, and the Necessary Tension of Dogmatics

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The formal principle of the Reformation was never relegated to geographical isolation. Transcending French, Swiss, Italian, British, and German borders, *sola Scriptura* became an epistemological dividing line that would be uniquely articulated by countless reformers, even if it was most officially heard first in Wittenberg in the years leading up to 1521. In part, the unification of the reformers around biblical authority proved to be a foundational pillar supporting the evangelical fortress Rome repeatedly attempted to demolish.

Such demolition, Rome would learn, was sometimes just as effective from the inside as from the outside. Implosion hovered over the Reformation as reformers often struggled to cooperate with one another, not only internationally but all too often within their own national ranks. It became painfully conspicuous that though each reformation trumpeted *sola Scriptura*, its application could be frustratingly variegated. For instance, consider the iconoclast controversy. The early Luther took a relatively mild approach to images in and outside churches, but in Zurich every image was a remnant of idolatry; the walls of the church had to be whitewashed.[1] *Sola Scriptura* may have been the epistemic nucleus of the Reformation, but it was simultaneously the dynamite that threated implosion as few Reformers could agree on the specifics of its ecclesiastical entailments.

Such a nagging incongruity is not merely apparent from reformer to reformer, but the dialectic we speak of is equally present within any given

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[1] On the way *sola Scriptura* took effect in Zurich, see Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

reformer's own theology. Cranmer, for example, labors (struggles?) to determine the relationship between *sola Scriptura* and allegiance to king or queen; certainly, the nature of his martyrdom demonstrates the triumph of the former.[2]

If Cranmer's application of the formal principle is forged in the fires at the stake, Calvin's matures in the study and at synods as he is thrust into controversy over the orthodoxy of his Trinitarianism. The absence of an extensive Trinitarian statement in the *Geneva Confession*, his mixed reception of orthodox vocabulary and creeds, his unique interpretation of eternal generation, and his immovable defense of the Son's aseity would result in a firestorm of accusations that lasted from the first edition to the last edition of his *Institutes*. So intense was the firestorm that Calvin would be accused on several occasions of heresy, both in the direction of Arianism and Sabellianism.

Such a controversy may be the most surprising of the sixteenth-century. If any name is associated with theological rigor, lucid precision, and uncompromising adherence to *sola Scriptura* over against the lure of speculation, it is John Calvin's. Nevertheless, Calvin would be entangled within a Trinitarian debate that not only brought into question the fidelity of his Nicene orthodoxy, but shook the foundation of his Biblicism, a Biblicism so often revered for its preservation of divine mystery and methodological determination to resist trespassing beyond revelation itself. Unexpectedly, Calvin was caught between the proverbial rock of biblical authority and the "hard place" of the Trinitarian tradition.

For that reason, poking at the tension between Calvin's affirmation of *sola Scriptura* and his contested Trinitarianism is, ironically enough, a way of answering a much larger question: How do we balance *sola Scriptura* with catholicity? The Trinity is the perfect lens through which to look for an answer to such a question. Nowhere is dogmatics so difficult than when the theologian dares to journey within the mystery of the Trinity and seek to define the infinite essence of a God who is triune.

Upon first instinct, such an approach may seem odd. Is not an appeal to Scripture inherent in biblical Trinitarianism? Does not orthodoxy, by

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[2] For a recent study of this tension in Cranmer, see Leslie Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched: A Short Life of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

definition, assume consistency with the biblical witness? Yet debates pre- and post-Nicaea have long revealed that the question is a complex one. Unlike other doctrines, orthodox Trinitarianism rests not on a proof text, or two, but on the synthesizing of biblical assertions, as well as deciding what conclusions logical follow from such assertions. The line between heresy and orthodoxy is a thin one precisely because citing biblical texts makes little headway; heretic and orthodox alike appeal to the same network of proof texts. Essential, even necessary, then, is the science and art of dogmatics, the ability to locate not merely that which is "expressly set down in Scripture," but the "good and necessary consequence" to be "deduced from Scripture," to cite the Westminster Confession of Faith's statement on Scriptural sufficiency.[3]

While it will be necessary to briefly review Calvin's debates with certain opponents, others have offered extensive summaries and evaluations, most recently Brannon Ellis, assessing not merely the debates but Calvin's own Trinitarianism and its modern reception.[4] Our task, rather, is far more hermeneutical. Few have attempted to determine how Calvin's Trinitarianism sheds light on his theological method, a method that holds *sola Scriptura* in the right hand and subscription to traditional, orthodox vocabulary in the left hand, without forfeiting either one.[5] While we will begin by pulling back the layers of controversy, layers that will aid us in understanding the motives of Calvin's decision

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[3] "The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)," in *Reformed Confessions, Volume 4*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), 235 (I.VI).

[4] Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Though he focusses strictly on the theological aspect, not the historical background, Douglas F. Kelly should be consulted as well: "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity (1.11-13)," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 65-89. The classic treatment is B. B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1952), 22-59.

[5] There have been some who look at Calvin's Trinitarianism with a view to theological method, but they are rare and usually very brief. E.g., W. Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 73-96; R. C. Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: The Case of Caroli," in *Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag*, ed. Herausgegeben von Willem van't Spijker (Kampen, Netherlands : J H Kok, 1991), 130-37.

making, our definitive objective is to observe Calvin's Trinitarian inclinations, even motivations, in order to determine how Calvin approached the dialectic between biblical authority and Nicene orthodoxy. Ultimately, Calvin will be but a foil, permitting us to draw out the repercussions for contemporary dogmatics.

I. Heresy accusations, creedal resistance, and autotheos

The Reformers had many nemeses, but it is often forgotten that such nemeses were not limited to Rome; many were friends and/or colleagues who broke rank. Pierre Caroli generally fits this description, though it is questionable whether he was truly reformed in the first place.

Having been removed from the faculty at Sorbonne (1525) for his contentious beliefs, Caroli would eventually find a home in Lausanne, serving as a minister there in the 1530s.[6] His role gave him access to colleagues such as Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, and at times even Calvin in nearby Geneva. In time, Caroli would prove not so much a colleague as a thorn in the side of the reformers. Over a short span of time, Caroli would convert to the Reformation and then back to Rome twice:

> 1535 (Switzerland): aligns himself with reformers (though begins to incite controversy)
> 1537 (France): converts to Rome
> c.1539 (Switzerland): re-aligns with reformers
> 1541 (Sorbonne in Paris): makes final conversion to Rome

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[6] There are many fine accounts of Caroli's career and his controversy with the reformers. For Calvin's own account, see his *Letters*, Part 1: 1528-1545, ed. Jules Bonnet and Henry Beveridge, trans. David Constable (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 47-58, 71-75, 150-168. Secondary works include Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 38-45; James K. Farge, *Biographical Register of Paris Doctors of Theology, 1500-1536* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980), 65-71; F. P. van Stam, "Le Livre de Pierre Caroli de 1545 et son conflict avec Calvin," in Olivier Millet, ed., *Calvin et ses contemporains* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1998); Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 73-96; Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 22-59. In my account that follows, I am most indebted to Nijenhuis and Ellis for their insights.

These "conversions," as we might label them, are somewhat deceiving. Though Caroli seemingly converted to the Reformation cause, his sympathies with Rome, as tamed as they may have been, still leaked out, leading some to question Caroli's authenticity and sincerity. "Caroli, in his heart of hearts," Nijenhuis speculates, "never opted radically for the Reformation."[7] Nijenhuis's indictment may be more than speculation. Controversy erupted in 1537 in Lausanne when Caroli instructed churchgoers to pray for the dead and intercede on their behalf.[8] Caroli did not hold his Roman sympathies privately either; he broadcasted them by means of his preaching.

Personal animosity lurked behind the scenes to be sure. Caroli resented Viret for criticizing his stance on prayers for the dead. In return Caroli went on the offensive; most shocking of all was his very public accusation in Lausanne that Viret, Farel, and Calvin were Arians.[9] Calvin defended himself and the others by appealing to the Geneva Confession (1536/1537). Caroli dismissed this new and therefore novel confession, insisting instead that Calvin put his name to the early Trinitarian creeds (e.g., Athanasian Creed), stating that one could not truly be a Christian unless one had done so. Calvin would not.[10] Regardless of Calvin's intentions, his refusal sent shock waves everywhere and Calvin would toil to clear his name, as well as the other Genevans, from this association with heresy.

What motivated Caroli's charge of Arianism? There may have been multiple factors, but one major factor was Caroli's criticism of the Geneva Confession's lack of extensive Trinitarian theology. Regardless, the charge was public and Calvin petitioned two Lausanne synods to meet to resolve the issue.[11]

At the first synod, the pattern of the previous debates repeated itself (Caroli snubbed the Geneva Confession and demanded Calvin submit to the creeds; Calvin refused). Despite his refusal to bow to Caroli's

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[7] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 78.

[8] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 79, says Caroli did add the qualifier: "non ut peccatis solvantur sed ut quam celerrime suscitentur."

[9] Calvin, *Letters*, 57.

[10] Calvin, *Letters*, 49. Cf. Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 40.

[11] Calvin, *Letters*, 47. Cf. Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 40.

demands to creedal subscription, Calvin gave a speech where affirmation of the Son's full deity was clearly manifested.[12] Notably, Calvin did not merely assert the Son's full equality with the Father, but he utilized the vocabulary of early orthodoxy. In continuity with "the ecclesiastical writers," Calvin confesses "three hypostases or subsistences in the most simple unity of God."[13] Calvin carefully specifies at length that although the three constitute "one essence" they must never be "conflated with one another."[14] Calvin names Arianism, Macedonianism, and Sabellianism, rejecting each, siding unequivocally with the Trinitarian orthodoxy of the fathers. Yet one will notice that Calvin does not use the

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[12] "We believe and worship the one God whom the Scriptures proclaim, and indeed we conceive of him as he is there described to us: as truly an eternal essence, infinite and spiritual, who alone possesses the power of subsisting in himself and of himself, and who bountifully gives subsistence] to all creatures. We reject the Anthropomorphites with their corporeal god, and also the Manicheans with their two Principles. In this one essence of God we acknowledge the Father with his eternal Word and Spirit. While we employ this distinction of names, we do not imagine three gods, as if the Father was something else than the Word. Neither on the other hand do we understand these to be empty epithets by which God is variously designated from his works. But at one with the ecclesiastical writers we hold these to be three hypostases or subsistences in the most simple unity of God, who, though constituting one essence, are nevertheless not conflated with one another; therefore, though there is one God, the Father with his Word and Spirit, nevertheless the Father is not the Word, nor the Word himself the Spirit . . . This is the sum of the matter: in what has been confessed above we have recognized the eternal, spiritual, infinite essence of God, the Father with his Word and Spirit, in such a way that the Father is neither conflated with the Word, nor the Word with the Spirit. The insane Arians who stripped the Son of his eternal divinity, and likewise the Macedonians, who understood the Spirit as merely the gift of grace poured into human beings, we reject and detest. No more do we approve the errors of the Sabellians who admitted no distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit." John Calvin, *Confessio de Trinitate proper calumnias P. Caroli* [*A Confession of the Trinity against the Calumnies of P. Caroli*] (1545), in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (vols. 29-87 in *Corpus Reformatorum*) (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863-1900), ix. 704. (As quoted in Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 41.) Going forward the abbreviation *CO* will be used.
[13] Calvin, *Confessio de Trinitate proper calumnias P. Caroli*, in *CO* ix. 704.
[14] Ibid.

words *trinitas* and *persona*. Such an omission is intentional on Calvin's part, unwilling to give ground to Caroli.[15]

However, Caroli felt Calvin undermined Christ's divinity. The reason had everything to do with Calvin's appeal to Christ as autotheos. "Before he clothed himself in our flesh, this eternal Word was begotten from the Father before the ages. He is true God, one with the Father in essence, power, majesty—even Jehovah, who has always *possessed it of himself that he is*, and has inspired the power of subsisting in other beings."[16] That the Son is "of himself" in reference to the divine essence was, for Calvin, the greatest assurance that the Son's deity is not less than the Father's. The Son may be eternally generated from the Father *as Son* but if the essence is generated, derived from the Father, then the Son's divine equality is compromised, a point Calvin would elaborate upon in his later writings.

Arianism, however, was not the only heresy Caroli accused Calvin of embracing; Sabellianism was to follow. Karl Barth says Caroli merely contradicted himself, but Ellis more accurately deciphers the reason: "The Arian charge seems an appeal to guilt by association, to be sure, but the Sabellian accusation was not so much political or cultural as doctrinal."[17] Ellis proves his point by turning to Calvin's own summary of his reaction to Caroli: "Certainly, if the distinction between the Father and the Word be attentively considered, we shall say that the one is from the other. If, however, the essential quality of the Word be considered, in so far as he is one God with the Father, whatever can be said concerning God may also be applied to him, the second person in the glorious Trinity."[18]

If, according to Caroli, Calvin's Arianism was due to a refusal to subscribe to the early creeds, his Sabellianism was the fruit of statements

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[15] Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son,* 42.

[16] Emphasis added. Calvin, *Confessio dei Trinitate,* in CO ix. 706. Cf. Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son,* 42.

[17] Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son,* 43. Contra Karl Barth, *The Theology of Calvin,* trans. Geoffrey D. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 328.

[18] Notice Calvin's exegetical support: "Now, what is the meaning of the name Jehovah? What did that answer imply which was spoken to Moses? I AM THAT I AM. Paul makes Christ the author of this statement." Calvin, *Letters,* 55-56.

where Calvin claims the Son to be *a se* in reference to the divine essence.[19] It is hard to determine whether Caroli accurately or fully understood what Calvin was and was not claiming. Either way, Calvin's statement reveals he is not denying eternal generation, but redirecting its object from the essence to the person, conserving the Son's divine aseity. "As true God together with the Father and the Spirit, *the Son does not receive the one divine essence that he simply is; he is God self-existently.*"[20] Nevertheless, Caroli remained unconvinced that eternal generation had not been forfeited by Calvin, and apart from eternal generation the three persons lose distinction.

Disparate personalities played a role in the affair as well. If Calvin struggled with a hot temper and impatience, Caroli could be intentionally antagonistic, seemingly looking for opportunities to stir up controversy among the Reformers. Examining the accounts of others in the sixteenth-century, particularly during the Caroli controversy, Nijenhuis has reason to believe Caroli was characterized by an "anxiety to assert himself" and attributes such anxiety to a "deeply rooted inferiority complex which found expression in a peculiar readiness to take offence." Nijenhuis spells out the collision between the two men: "The expressions of a conscious feeling of superiority on the part of the reformer must inevitably have provoked an aggressive reaction from someone so touchy, and contrariwise, nothing would shortly give so much satisfaction to a man like Caroli than to see the Swiss reformers in the

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[19] "It is evident from the 'calumnies' enumerated in Calvin's later exchange with Caroli that he restricted insinuations of Arianism largely to suspicions regarding the employment of technical vocabulary and creedal subscription. The doctrinal accusations, however, were nearly all variations on the modalistic implications of how he understood Calvin's views: that Calvin 'denies the distinction between the Father and the Son', that he 'posits a single person in the Deity', and so on. [See Calvin, *Pro G. Farello*, in *CO* vii. 317-22.] Especially in light of Calvin's explanation of his views at synod, it is most likely that Caroli had charged Calvin with Arianism because of his less than deferential approach to specific traditional forms, but came to suspect Calvin of Sabellianism because of his claim of the aseity for the Son." Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 43.

[20] Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 45. Cf. Arie Baars, *Om Gods verhevenheid en Zijn nabijheid: De drie-eenheid bij Calvijn* (Campen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2005), 111-112, 115-119.

dock accused of heresy."[21] What made the situation worse was the way Caroli's aggressiveness and creedal condescension smelled like Rome. "This passion for self-assertion was speedily associated by the reformers with hierarchical aspirations of Roman origin."[22]

After both synods in Lausanne, the verdict was in: Calvin was no heretic. As for Caroli, he was deemed unfit to continue as a minister.[23] Still, the damage was done to Calvin's wider reputation, not only in France but Germany as well, which must have frustrated those pushing for unity between Swiss and German reformations.[24]

Calvin may have thought controversy had ended, but his adherence to autotheos—in conjunction with his definition of eternal generation as a generation of personhood, not essence—would prove to be controversial in the decades ahead. This much is plain in his 1543 to 1545 conflict with Jean Courtois and Jean Chaponneau in Neuchâtel, as well as yet another debate with Caroli in 1545 (this time Caroli accusing Calvin of "blasphemy" for saying "Christ exists from himself").[25]

The 1550s and 1560s would introduce anti-Trinitarians like Michael Servetus and certain Italians like Valentine Gentile to Calvin (though Servetus and Gentile operated out of different anti-Trinitarian hermeneutics). In each controversy, the aseity of the Son would be in focus once more, yet now with an apologetic agenda to defend the Son's full deity against skeptics.[26] According to Gentile, the Father, not the Son, is autotheos, and therefore the Father alone is God. The Son merely has

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[21] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 77. Nijenhuis cites *CO*, vii, c. 302.

[22] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 77.

[23] Calvin, *Letters*, 55-56; idem, *Confessio de Trinitate*, in *CO* ix. 710.

[24] The timing was unfortunate. The Swiss reformers had labored to bring about peace and potentially unity with their German counterparts. Rumors of heresy would not land softly on the ears of those in Germany. See Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 80.

[25] These conflicts oscillated not so much around creedal subscription but Calvin's understanding of the Son's aseity, an issue we will return to in the 1559 *Institutes*. For a summary of the conflicts, see Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 45-50.

[26] See John Calvin, *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra Trinitate contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani . . .* (1554), in *CO* viii. 453-872; idem, *Impietas Valentini Gentilis detecta et palam traducta qui Christum non sine sacrilege blasphemia Deum essentiatum esse fingit* (1561), in *CO* ix. 361-430. Again, for an overview, see Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asity of the Son*, 50-61.

the Father's deity infused into him, resulting in the impossibility of Gentile affirming a Trinity in the orthodox sense.[27] This time the accusation of heresy would be lobbed by Calvin upon his opponents and the Son's aseity would be the instrument to defend Nicene orthodoxy. While these later conflicts oscillated not so much around creedal subscription but Calvin's doctrine of Christological aseity, it is imperative for our purposes to return to the creedal dilemma as it sheds lights on Calvin's methodology.

II. Interpreting Calvin's resistance to creedal subscription

Calvin's resistance has been interpreted in countless ways, most of which pay little attention to Calvin's motives and context.[28] Yet Calvin's own explanation deserves first consideration: "[I] did not wish to see such an example of tyranny introduced into the church, consisting in this, that he who had not spoken according to the directions of another, would be regarded as a heretic."[29]

In his stance against "tyranny" Calvin is not enacting an Enlightenment revolution of the individual's rights, as one who is ahead of his time. Such a reading is not only anachronistic, but inconsistent with Calvin's strict emphasis upon the assembly, the church, over against the individual (as Calvin's frustrations with certain radical reformers demonstrates).[30] It is the Scriptures, not the individual, Calvin is most concerned not to bind.

It is not unreasonable to assume that Caroli, given his demands, was still operating out of a Roman position on creedal authority, or at least something close to it. As Heiko Oberman has demonstrated, a T2 methodology had evolved in the late medieval era and become prevalent in Roman theologians by Calvin's day. Tradition had been elevated to the

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[27] E.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.23.

[28] For a survey of the literature, see Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 88-89.

[29] *CO*, VII, c. 315. Cf. Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 88.

[30] Countering J. Th. McNeill who believes Calvin is trumpeting the "liberty of conscience," Nijenhuis demonstrates that the reformers "were not primarily concerned with the freedom of the human conscience—this trend was most characteristic of Renaissance and Humanism—but with the freedom of the Word of God. They thought more in terms of the church than the individual." Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 88.

same level (in some cases, an even higher level) as Scripture, as if it too was revelatory, God-breathed, and consequently without error.[31] An appeal to pope or council no longer was ministerial, but now functioned as the magisterial voice to which all else, including Scripture, must bend.

Caroli's demand to submit to creeds felt too much like T2 for Calvin. As much as Calvin revered the creeds and would, in later controversies with anti-Trinitarians defend and employ their Trinitarian vocabulary, Calvin was not about to give in to Caroli. To do so would communicate not only defeat on his part but a disloyalty to Scripture as his formal principle. Calvin would be criticized for this decision, even looked at suspiciously by other reformers on the Continent. Yet Caroli's approach, and his tone for that matter, was interpreted by Calvin not as a concern to harmonize the creeds with Scripture, but as a pitch to mother church to decide the matter. Caroli rejected Geneva's confession, demanding subscription to the early creeds in a way that felt ritualistic and traditionalistic.

While Calvin was for tradition, he was against traditionalism. The creeds, as Calvin's *Institutes* and *Defensio* reveal, were authoritative if, and only if, they reflected Scripture consistently and faithfully.[32] Calvin was not merely guarded against Biblicism but traditionalism, and Caroli's demands were the latter in Calvin's eyes.[33] Perhaps no one summarizes the hinge of the confrontation as well as Nijenhuis:

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[31] See Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 46-47. On T2 see Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 361–93; Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 276; Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 54–55.

[32] "For him [Calvin], however, their real authority resided not in their formal ecclesiastical sanction but in their material agreement with the Holy Scriptures. In defense of this point of view he cited testimonies from the early church itself. What else did Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine and Cyril desire but 'to speak from the Scriptures?'" Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 93. Nijenhuis is citing *CO*, VII, c. 318.

[33] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 96, labels Calvin's aversion to each a rejection of "superstitio."

For what Caroli asked of the French-Swiss reformers was not in fact agreement with the religion of the early church symbols, but a rational agreement with all the expressions employed in the symbols and in particular with the words trinitas and persona. The prosecutor displayed a respect for these expressions which appeared to Calvin "superstitious". The reformers did not refuse to subscribe to the early church symbols because they did not feel themselves bound by them and associated with them, but because they wished to dissociate themselves from Caroli's conjuring with words. They could only understand the signing of a confession as a profession of the true religion as contrasted with error. For this reason the action demanded by Caroli would have given an entirely incorrect impression of the situation. For the religion of the early church symbols was not at issue at all, and thus the Swiss did not wish to give anyone cause to suspect that it ever had been.[34]

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[34] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 91, 95. There are additional reasons to believe Calvin was not inherently opposed to creedal subscription, either in his debate with Caroli or in later debates:
1. In his 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, there are already indicators, even if they be in seed form, that the Apostles Creed has influenced its content. Such influence will become increasingly conspicuous in later editions, most noticeable in his 1559 edition, which is framed by the Creed in significant ways. (On the influence of the Apostles Creed, see Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 73.) Additionally, Calvin is not shy to invoke the creed's authority throughout, at times even defending it against opponents.
2. Calvin's Geneva not only had a confession of its own, but citizens were required to subscribe to Calvin's confession. Neither Calvin or Geneva's citizen's thought such a subscription was a return to Rome, as if the creed itself was inspired and inerrant. Rather, they saw the creed as man-made, yet a needed fence that clarified Scriptural truth and guarded the church and city from heresy. Nijenhuis does add a helpful nuance: "It did not mean every member of Geneva's population regarded every formulation of the confession as infallible. Apart from the fact that this would have been impossible either to carry out or to check, it would have been completely at variance with Calvin's views regarding a certain relativity in the wording of the confession. It did mean, however, that the city accepted the religion of the confession." Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 90.

Nijenhuis is correct to conclude that the main issue for Calvin was authority, particularly whether the authority of the creeds is material or formal.[35] For Calvin it was the former; for Caroli the latter. In that light, Calvin's refusal is understandable; he is a reformer and *sola Scriptura* would remain his formal principle.

Having witnessed Calvin's response to Caroli, attention must now be given to Calvin's positive presentation in his 1559 *Institutes*, with singular focus on what this edition reveals about the way he balances *sola Scriptura* with the formation of and adherence to orthodox Trinitarianism, and with it catholicity.

III. Calvin's methodology in the 1559 *Institutes*

1. Infinitude and divine accommodation

Prior to advancing his treatment of the Trinity, Calvin first begins with the infinitude of the divine nature, stressing not only the accommodation of God to man in revelation but the incomprehensibility of an infinite being to a finite creature. On the one hand, God so accommodates himself to mankind that he can be described as one who "lisp[s] in speaking to us," much as "nurses commonly do with infants."[36] Yet divine speech in the form of accommodation, or lisping, does not "so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity." To lisp he "must descend far beneath his loftiness."[37]

Divine infinity, in other words, is the reason for divine accommodation. His infinite nature should set in place strategic boundaries that are not to be crossed, acting as hermeneutical safeguards. "Surely, his infinity," says Calvin, "ought to make us afraid to try to measure him by our own senses. Indeed, his spiritual nature forbids our imagining anything earthly or carnal of him."[38] Affecting

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3. Calvin would sign the *Confessio Helvetica Prior* at the Synod of Berne (1537), which is incredibly surprising if Calvin has an allergy to confessionalism. (Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 91.)

[35] Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, 95.

[36] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

Calvin's methodology is the Creator-creature distinction. Though the biblical authors speak truly, they often do so analogically, anthropomorphically, or parabolically. While they may speak of him according to "our own senses," we dare not assume we should then "measure him by our own senses."

Calvin's fear of entering territory that treads too closely to the divine essence will manifest itself in his articulation of the Trinity as well. "Scripture sets forth a distinction of the Father from the Word," says Calvin, "and of the Word from the Spirit." "Yet the greatness of the mystery warns us how much reverence and sobriety we ought to use in investigating this."[39] How much sobriety is necessary exactly?

One cannot help but notice that sprinkled throughout Calvin's treatment of eternal generation and autotheos are sporadic warnings. At the start he pulls back considerably to say: "Indeed, it is far safer to stop with that relation which Augustine sets forth than by too subtly penetrating into the sublime mystery to wander through many evanescent speculations."[40] Having affirmed that each person fully shares in the one essence, an essence who's unity cannot be divided, Calvin issues one of his most sobering warnings, preaching, it seems, as much to himself as to others: "Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of Scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation; let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends." If divine revelation acts as a rail guard on the right, God's infinite essence is a rail guard on the left:

> For how can the human mind measure off the measureless essence of God according to its own little measure, a mind as yet unable to establish for certain the nature of the sun's body, though men's eyes daily gaze upon it? Indeed, how can the mind by its own leading come to search out God's essence when it cannot even get to its own? Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself. ...And let us not take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his Sacred Word, or to think anything about

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[39] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.17.
[40] Ibid., 1.13.19.

him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word.[41]

How then should the Trinity be approached within the limits of God's Word and infinite, incomprehensible essence? Are distinctions within this infinite essence appropriate or do they attempt to measure the measureless essence of God?

> But if some distinction does exist in the one divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit—something hard to grasp—and occasions to certain minds more difficulty and trouble than is expedient, let it be remembered that men's minds, when they indulge their curiosity, enter into a labyrinth. And so let them yield themselves to be ruled by the heavenly oracles, even though they may fail to capture the height of the mystery.[42]

Is it possible Calvin could, intentionally or unintentionally, be speaking to himself, not merely his adversaries, in such a statement of seasoned wisdom? It is hard to say. What is clear is that Calvin's controversies had produced a reformer who had certainly travelled the maze of the triune labyrinth, even entertaining distinctions "hard to grasp." Though it is impossible to "capture the height of the mystery," Calvin does repeatedly yield himself "to be ruled by the heavenly oracles." On the one hand, it may seem ironic that one so tethered to the syntax of the biblical witness explores the philosophical contours of eternal generation. On the other hand, could Calvin be more consistent? Fearful of the infinite essence, nervous to cross beyond the threshold of biblical vocabulary, Calvin will adopt a position on eternal generation and autotheos that is motivated first and foremost by a defense of Christ's divinity.[43] As biblically oriented as that motivation is for Calvin, there are several reasons why he would press on to retrieve the vocabulary of traditional Trinitarianism.

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[41] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.21.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Unaddressed in this study is Calvin's lengthy apologetic for Christ's deity, yet it is one sandwiched in between Calvin's discussion of methodology and the aseity of the Son.

2. *The unfortunate but important necessity of orthodox, Trinitarian vocabulary*

Despite Calvin's warning not to tread beyond God's lisping should one venture too closely into the mystery of his infinite essence, properly defining that infinite essence, particularly as it relates to the three persons, is necessary. It's necessity stems, at least in part, from the need to distinguish God from idols. "Unless we grasp these [three], only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God."[44]

Why is it that Calvin can probe God's infinite essence when he previously warned not to tread where incomprehensibility denies access? As incomprehensible as the infinite essence may be, God has chosen to manifest himself in veiled form and his triune identity is no exception, more or less hidden in the Old Testament only to be displayed in the incarnation of the Son. Hence Calvin, who otherwise is suspicious of importing extra-biblical vocabulary, stands behind traditional Trinitarian terminology, if for no other reason than it keeps the creature bound to a biblical understanding of Trinity in redemptive history and guards him from an idolatrous imagination of the divine.

Some, Calvin acknowledges, "hatefully inveigh against the word 'person,' as if humanly devised."[45] Calvin likely has in mind Servetus. By contrast, Calvin issues a defense of "hypostasis," even differentiates hypostasis from "essence," labelling any attempt to treat the two synonymously "uncouth" and "absurd."[46] Correcting misinterpretations of Hebrews 1:3, next Calvin builds his case, demonstrating how the "hypostasis that shines forth in the Son is in the Father." Concurrently, the "Son's hypostasis" is also that "which distinguishes him from the Father."[47]

When Calvin transitions to the hypostasis of the Spirit, he enters the fray of patristic vocabulary. Calvin is convinced that to do justice to a text like Hebrews 1:3, "three hypostases" must be maintained. Yet the "Latins," he remarks, "can express the same concept by the word

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[44] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.2.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

'person.'" Calvin shows little patience for those hesitant with the patristic vocabulary: "To wrangle over this clear matter is undue squeamishness and even obstinacy." Calvin suggests translators (especially those inclined to translate word-for-word) use "subsistence" to convey how the three persons wholly and equally possess the one essence.[48] Calvin's litany of word studies demonstrates how comfortable he is with Nicene and post-Nicene vocabulary. One does not sense a theologian strapped to biblical terminology alone.

When Calvin is pressed by anti-Trinitarians, "heretics" that "rail at the word 'person,'" or by certain "squeamish men" who "cry out against admitting a term fashioned by the human mind," Calvin's appeal to extra-biblical, orthodox Trinitarian vocabulary becomes especially conspicuous. "What wickedness, then, it is to disapprove of words that explain nothing else than what is attested and sealed by Scripture!"[49] When Nicene terms are used to teach that Father, Son, and Spirit are each "entirely God" and yet "there is not more than one God," they object, believing it is best to "confine within the limits of Scripture not only our thoughts but also our words, rather than scatter foreign terms about, which would become seedbeds of dissension and strife."[50]

If such words foreign to the Biblical text are "curiously devised" and "superstitiously defended," producing "contention" not "edification," and if such words detract "from the simplicity of God's Word," then Calvin will release them. Yet if such Trinitarian vocabulary clarifies truths in Scripture that are otherwise distorted, it should not be resisted. "But what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly and on due occasion?"[51] Be that as it may, in his admission of extra-biblical terminology, Calvin advises it be used "sparingly and modestly." Calvin subscribes but he does so

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[48] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2. As he will explain elsewhere, "'Person,' therefore, I call a 'subsistence' in God's essence, which, while related to the others, is distinguished by an incommunicable quality. By the term 'subsistence' we would understand something difference from 'essence.'" 1.13.6.

[49] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.3.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

reluctantly. With the church, Calvin is "compelled to make use of the words 'Trinity' and Persons,'" novel words according to Calvin.[52]

As opposed to novelty as Calvin may be, he is forced to embrace it lest false teachers muddy the triune Godhead.[53] Heresy is the mother of confusion; it must be countered by clarity. For Calvin, clarity is a virtue in theology. In an attempt to achieve such clarity, Calvin aligns himself with the patristics, those "men of old, stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas," men who "were compelled to set forth with consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage."[54] With the rise of Sabellius and Arius, the fathers appealed to *homoousios* in order to communicate that "a Trinity of persons subsists in the one God."[55]

The reader senses a tension in Calvin. Calvin is, in one sense, a Biblicist of sorts. "Indeed, I could wish they [Trinitarian, extra-biblical terms] were buried..." Calvin wishes everyone would not dissent but peaceably agree that "Father and Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but that they are differentiated by a peculiar quality."[55] Such Biblicism is a dream and Calvin knows it. He sees his own reflection in Augustine, who, "on account of the poverty of human speech in so great a matter, the word 'hypostasis' had been forced upon us by necessity, not to express what it is, but only not to be silent on how Father, Son, and Spirit are three."[57] For Calvin, "necessity" is a regretful but needed force, keeping one on the road to orthodoxy.

Yet again, Calvin's Biblicism is apparent in his judgment of those who have a weak lexical conscience. Like many patristics, some in Calvin's day "do not wish to swear to the words conceived by us." Calvin warns against censoring such individuals. Such a pass is acceptable "provided they are not doing it out of either arrogance or forwardness or malicious

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[52] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.3.

[53] "The novelty of word of this sort...becomes especially useful when the truth is to be asserted against false accusers, who evade it by their shifts. ...With such crooked and sinuous twisting these slippery snakes glide away unless they are boldly pursued, caught, and crushed." Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.3.

[54] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.4.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 1.13.5.

[57] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.5. Just previous to his mention of Augustine, Calvin also appeals to the example of Hilary.

craft."[58] Nevertheless, Calvin's Biblicism has checks and balances, most importantly his equally serious concern for theological clarity. He warns these individuals that bypassing Nicene terminology puts them at risk for being confused with Arianism or Sabellianism (is Calvin speaking from experience?). One must not forget that in the third and fourth centuries these groups also bypassed extra-biblical terminology, priding themselves as "biblical." Calvin powerful validates the advantage, then, of not limiting oneself to biblical language:

> To counter Arius, "say 'consubstantial' and you will tear off the mask of this turncoat, and yet you add nothing to Scripture."
> To counter Sabellius, "say that in the one essence of God there is a Trinity of persons; you will say in one word what Scripture states, and cut short empty talkativeness."[59]

In summary, though Calvin slowly comes around to Nicene and post-Nicene vocabulary, regretting along the way that such vocabulary is necessary in the first place, he embraces it for the fundamental reason that it clarifies what heretics otherwise confuse. Calvin exhibits a stubbornly reluctant advocacy of orthodox, Trinitarian terminology, yet a devoted advocacy nonetheless.

3. Eternal generation, autotheos, and Calvin's contribution

Calvin's lexical temperance would not keep him from developing a stream of patristic thought on the matter of eternal generation. At Nicaea eternal generation is captured by that phrase "God of God." While a survey of patristic thought is not appropriate here, it has been widely

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[58] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.5.
[59] Calvin then advises how to proceed with those timid with words: "Indeed, if anxious superstition so constrains anyone that he cannot bear these terms, yet no one could now deny, even if he were to burst, that when we hear 'one' we ought to understand 'unity of substance'; when we hear 'three in one essence,' the persons in this trinity are meant. When this is confessed without guile, we need not dally over words. But I have long since and repeatedly been experiencing that all who persistently quarrel over words nurse a secret poison. As a consequence, it is more expedient to challenge them deliberately than speak more obscurely to please them." Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.5.

recognized that a stream of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers intended a generation of the divine essence from the Father to the Son, though one that has no beginning (contra Arianism). That the essence itself is communicated from the Father, who is unbegotten, is proof that the Son shares the same deity as him who is begotten.

Calvin affirms eternal generation, but he is convinced that in order for the Son to be fully God, the Son must be God in and of himself, contrary to his anti-Trinitarian opponents. As Calvin will argue, a derived essence, even if eternally derived, implies that the Son is less than the Father and threatens to divide the unity of the Godhead, compromising the simplicity of the undivided essence. The Son, in short, must be autotheos. Eternal generation, therefore, cannot be the communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son. Personhood, not essence, must be the target of eternal generation.

At the start of Calvin's treatment of the issue, he observes that the fathers are not uniform. "Sometimes, indeed, they teach that the Father is the beginning of the Son; sometimes they declare that the Son has both divinity and essence from himself, and thus has one beginning with the Father."[60] Calvin believes Augustine is a forerunner of his own view: "Augustine well and clearly expresses the cause of this divinity…when he speaks as follows: 'Christ with respect to himself is called God; with respect to the Father, Son.'"[61]

Calvin's 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is written with the history of his controversies in full view. His argument is motivated in part by "certain rascals"—Valentine Gentile being first among them no doubt. Though these rascals believe there are three persons, they've "added the provision that the Father, who is truly and properly the sole God, in forming the Son and the Spirit, infused into them his own deity." Infused deity is a "dreadful manner of speaking" because the Father becomes "the only 'essence giver' [*essentiator*]." And if the Father is the essence giver

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[60] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.19.

[61] Ibid. Calvin may be citing Augustine's comments on Psalm 109.13 and 68:5. Calvin will go on to appeal to Augustine's fifth book on *On the Trinity.* Calvin concludes, "Therefore, when we speak simply of the Son without regard to the Father, we well and properly declare him to be of himself; and for this reason we call him the sole beginning. But when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son." 1.13.19.

then the Son's deity is a derived deity, which cannot have the same equality as an underived deity.[62]

If Christ must "borrow his essence from elsewhere," Calvin objects, having "been given his essence from the Father," then the Son cannot have "his being from himself."[63] Again, Calvin is not only concerned that a denial of autotheos compromises the Son's full deity but the Godhead's essential simplicity and unity as well.[64] The essence must be divisible to be derived.

> Now if we conclude that all essence is in the Father alone, either it will become divisible or be taken away from the Son. And thus deprived of his essence, he will be God in name only. The essence of God, if these babblers are to be believed, belongs to the Father only, inasmuch as he alone is, and is the essence giver of the Son. Thus the divinity of the Son will be something abstracted from God's essence, or a part derived from the whole.[65]

So problematic is such an abstraction and derivation that Calvin is convinced it would result in a Son who is a "half-God" and an essence that has been torn apart. In sum, "the essence is wholly and perfectly common to Father and Son."[66]

If the Father alone is not autotheos, but so is the Son, then what will guard Calvin from an overemphasis on triune unity, whereby the Father simply becomes the Son and the Son becomes the Father? Has

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[62] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.23.

[63] Ibid.

[64] The issue of simplicity will return in 1.13.25: "But they are obviously deceived...for they dream of individuals, each having its own separate part of the essence."

[65] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.23. Calvin will make his case, in part, by appealing to the biblical name "God" as that which refers not merely to the Father but every person of the Trinity.

[66] Calvin does anticipate a response: "If they make rejoinder that the Father in bestowing essence nonetheless remains the sole God, in whom the essence is, Christ then will be a figurative God, a God in appearance and name only, not in reality itself. For there is nothing more proper to God than to be, according to that saying, 'He who is has sent me to you' [Ex. 3:14, Vg.]." Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.23.

Calvin, as some opponents charged, fallen prey to Sabellianism in his denial of an eternal generation of the essence? Calvin is cognizant of the dilemma. There has to be a "mark of differentiation," as Calvin calls it. That "mark" cannot be the essence: "Those who locate that mark in the essence clearly annihilate Christ's true deity, which without essence, and indeed the whole essence, cannot exist."[67] The "mark" must be personhood. Begotten eternally is not the essence but the *person* of the Son.

    If the generation of essence results in a divided essence, each person "having its own separate part of the essence," Scripture's emphasis on the one essence must instead mean "that the essence both of the Son and the Spirit is unbegotten."[68] Calvin quickly qualifies that calling the Son and Spirit unbegotten in essence does not preclude him from still labelling the Father the "beginning and fountainhead of the whole of divinity." He is called such because he is "first in order."[69] First in order, it must be clarified, is not the same as first in essence. The Father can be attributed the "beginning of deity" but "not in the bestowing of essence, as fanatics babble, but by reason of order."[70] The same nuance is present in Calvin's 1545 *Catechismus ecclesiae Genevensis,* as well as the 1559 *French Confession.*[71]

    Calvin denies the charge that he has created a "quaternity," in which all "three persons came forth by derivation from one essence." "On the contrary," Calvin counters, "it is clear from our writings that we do not separate the persons from the essence, but we distinguish among them while they remain within it."[72] The persons of the Trinity are not without

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[67] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.23.

[68] Ibid., 1.13.25.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., 1.13.26

[71] See question 19 in particular: *Joannis Calvini opera selecta,* ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-52), 2:76-77; *CO* 6:13-14. For his 1559 *French Confession,* see *OS,* 2:312. Letham comments on the former: "Here he calls the Father the beginning or origin, the first cause. Again, he is speaking of the relations of the persons, not of the one divine essence or being." Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 260.

[72] "If the persons had been separate from the essence, the reasoning of these men might have been probable; but in this way there would have been a trinity

the essence or outside the essence; apart from the divine essence no one person is God, nor does any member have his subsistence in the one essence.[73] Nonetheless, in an "absolute sense," Calvin explains, deity "exists of itself." Since the Son is God, he "exists of himself." His self-existence is not "in respect of his Person," Calvin clarifies, "since he is the Son" and as Son "he exists from the Father." He "exists of himself" only in respect to his divine essence. "Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself."[74]

IV. Did Calvin depart from traditional Trinitarianism?

Was Calvin's Trinitarianism a departure from traditional Trinitarianism? Such a question has stirred no small debate in past decades. Some answer in the affirmative, believing Calvin to be paving a new way, criticizing Nicene Trinitarianism along the way.[75] To see Calvin as an innovator is a misreading in the eyes of others who see nothing new in Calvin's thought. Calvin has, they argue, merely reiterated and retrieved the patristic voices since Nicaea.[76]

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of gods, not of persons whom the one God contains in himself." Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.25.

[73] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.25.

[74] Ibid.

[75] E.g., Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology,* first edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 327; idem, *A New Systematic Theology,* second edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 328; Roger T. Beckwith, "The Calvinist Doctrine of the Trinity," *Churchman* 115, no. 4 (2001): 308-315; John Murray, "Systematic Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 25 (May 1963): 141; Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 197.

[76] Robert Letham, review of *A New Systematic Theology* (first edition), Robert Reymond, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 314-319; Paul Owen, "An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity in his Appeal to John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (2000): 262-281; François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought,* trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 168-169; Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin,* trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 54-57; T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 61-62; Philip W. Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

What many fail to realize, however, is that the question itself is flawed. The patristic pedigree of eternal generation is variegated, justifiably evasive of a simplistic "yes" or "no" answer. The answer that should follow the question "Was Calvin departing from traditional Trinitarianism?" should be: "Which tradition?" Two different traditions are present before, during, and after Nicaea, a reality that many in this debate fail to address, though not missed by Douglas Kelly and Brandon Ellis.[77] Nor is it missed by Calvin himself, who, as pointed out already, acknowledged such heterogeneity in patristic thought.[78]

One tradition, represented by patristics such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus, attributes eternal self-existence to the Father alone. Designating primacy to the Father, he is the origin from which the divine essence is eternally generated to the Son. The Son's deity is derived from and caused by his Father. Kelly labels this tradition "subordinationism" since the Son's essence is caused by and derived from the Father.[79] That label is understandable but also potentially misleading as subordinationisms also characterized Arians and Origenists (though in different ways). It is also doubtful that fathers like Basil, Gregory, and John of Damascus would appreciate such an unorthodox association.

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[77] Many of those I've cited in this debate fail to ask this question or entertain whether there is variety in the patristic tradition. While those proposing novelty in Calvin's Trinitarianism like to cite those fathers who teach an eternal generation of essence, those denying any novelty like to cite those fathers teaching an eternal generation of persons. Though there are exceptions, both sides of the debate fail to see the obvious. Acknowledging that there is diversity among the patristics completely changes the debate. In that sense, Kelly and Ellis are a breath of fresh air. Nevertheless, if there is one side in the debate that is more problematic, it must be those who see Calvin as totally departing from Nicaea-Constantinople (e.g., Reymond). Those who press instead for continuity are correct to critique those who argue for total discontinuity; the problem, however, is that in their attempt to argue for continuity they swing the pendulum too far to the other side, struggling to see that if there is continuity it is with a specific patristic stream of thought.

[78] Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.13.19.

[79] Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 14; idem, *Letter* 38.4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 1.42; idem, *That There Are Not Three Gods,* in *NPNF,* 5:336; John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 1.8. As cited by Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," 82-83.

A second tradition is represented by Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, and Epiphanius.[80] Suspicious of imbibing degrees of divinity or ontological subordination in the Godhead, these fathers rejected the belief that the Son's deity is caused or derived. Though their language may not be as explicit as Calvin's, hints of the Son's aseity with reference to the divine essence or divinity are present. The eternal generation of the Son is not denied by these patristics, but they do resist the thought of eternal generation functioning as a means to delivering a derivative essence in the Son.[81]

In view of his *Institutes,* it should be clear that Calvin followed this second tradition. [82] As one might expect, Calvin's many debates with those who taught that the Son had a derived or infused essence also reveal a dependence on certain fathers and councils, Nicaea included.[83] Briefly consider three examples. First, in his debate with Gentile, Calvin appeals to both the Council of Nicaea and Athanasius.

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[80] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29.2; 40.41, 43; 43.29; Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogues sur la Trinité,* vol. 1, "Dialogue 2," Sources Chrétiennes, 239-41; idem, *Thesaurus de Trinitate,* in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca,* 75:128, 145, 177; idem, *In Joannis Evangelium* 15.1; Epiphanius, *Haereses* 62.3; idem, *Ancoratus* 46. As cited by Kelly, who labels this second tradition "full equalitarian." Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," 84-86.

[81] I have mostly interacted with Kelly, whose treatment is brief. For a more extensive analysis, see Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 64-102. Pay special attention to pages 100-101 where Ellis label's Calvin's view a "complex solidarity" with reference to the classical tradition.

[82] For diverse but in-depth treatments of Nicaea-Constantinople, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Peter Widdecombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (rev. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[83] E.g., in Calvin, *Opera Calvini* 11:560, Calvin references Cyril of Alexandria, *De Trinitate* 3; in *Opera Calvini* 7:322, 323.4, Calvin references Epiphanius, *Haereses* 69. Cf. Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," 86; B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1956), 283.

But the words of the Council of Nicaea resound "God of God." This is a hard saying, I acknowledge. However, no one is better able to remove any ambiguity or a more capable interpreter than Athanasius who composed it. And certainly the counsel of the fathers was no other than that the Son in terms of origin is led out from the Father, in respect of his person, and in no way to oppose his being of the same essence and deity. And so, according to essence, he is the word of God without beginning, according to his person however the Son has a beginning from the Father.[84]

Apparently, Calvin believed his understanding of eternal generation was what Nicaea meant by phrases like "God of God" and he clearly thought Athanasius's interpretation of the creed only increased his credibility. Such an interpretation of Nicaea (especially in view of that phrase "of the substance of the Father"—*de substantia Patris*), could be debated. It is, as Ellis observes, at the very least a "unique interpretation," especially given the way the phrase was used by other patristics to teach the generation of the divine essence.[85] Regardless, Calvin believed there was precedence for his position at Nicaea, and therefore orthodox, however unique such a reading may have been.

Second, consider Calvin's second debate with Caroli in 1545. According to Caroli, Calvin had abandoned the eternal generation of the Son by demanding the Son to be *a se* in his divinity.[86] Calvin countered: It is critical that the Son exists of himself—*a se ipso existentem*— with reference to his divinity or essence. Cyril, "who often prefers to call the Father the origin [*principium*] of the Son," nevertheless "holds it in the highest degree absurd for the Son not to be believed to possess life and immortality *a se ipso*." Cyril "also teaches that if it is proper to the ineffable nature to be *a se ipsa,* this is rightly ascribed to the Son." In

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[84] *CO*, 9:370. Note again Calvin's appeal to the fathers in the *French Confession*: "We receive what was determined by the ancient councils, and we hate all sects and heresies which were rejected by the holy doctors from the time of St. Hilary and Athanasius until St. Ambrose and Cyril." *CO*, 9:739-42; *OS* 2:312.

[85] Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 13.

[86] For an overview of the two sides in this 1545 debate, see Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 48-50.

Cyril's "tenth book of his *Thesaurus,* he argues that the Father possesses nothing *a se ipso* which the Son does not possess *a se ipso*."[87]

Third, it should not be missed that Calvin, that same year, also responded to Chaponneau, penning one of his most forthcoming statements summarizing not only his position but the "state of the controversy."

> This is the state of the controversy: Whether it may be truly predicated of Christ, that he is, as he is God, *a se ipso*? This Chaponneau denies. Why? Because the name of Christ designates the second person in the Godhead, who stands in relation to the Father. I confess that if respect is had to the person, we ought not to speak thus. *But I say we are not speaking of the person but of the essence.* ...Chaponneau contends that Christ, because he is of the substance of the Father, is not *a se ipso,* since he has a beginning from another. *This I allow to him of the person.* ...I confess that the Son of God is of the Father. Accordingly, since the person has an order [*ratio*], I confess that he is not *a se ipso*. But when *we are speaking of his divinity or simply of the essence* (which is the same thing) apart from consideration of the person, I say that it is rightly predicated of him that he is *a se ipso.*[88]

Calvin could not be more transparent: In his person, the Son is not *a se ipso;* in his essence, the Son is *a se ipso*. The Son is from the Father as Son but the Son is from himself as divine. Calvin believed some fathers, though not all, agreed.

Did Calvin depart from traditional Trinitarianism? Traditional Trinitarianism proves too diverse to make the question legitimate. Nevertheless, Calvin, and his autotheos doctrine, particularly its allergy to any notion of a derivative or caused divine *essence,* does stand firmly within one major stream, a stream that does have ties back to the fourth

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[87] Calvin, *Confession of the Trinity,* in *CO* ix. 708-9. This is Warfield's translation with modification from Ellis. Cf. Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 49.

[88] Emphasis mine (though not to the Latin). *CO* x.16. This translation is from Warfield with certain edits from Ellis, though I have abbreviated the passage at various points. Cf. Ellis. Cf. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," 238-9; Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 46.

century. For that reason, it would be misguided to conclude that Calvin is not orthodox or Nicene. One would have to equally declare certain fathers, like Gregory of Nazianzus or Cyril of Alexandria, unorthodox.[89]

Yet neither would it be accurate to simplistically conclude that Calvin merely regurgitates those before him, contributing nothing to the ongoing refinement of Nicene Trinitarianism. To pretend the fathers are uniform and claim Calvin merely echoes that unified tradition, not only misrepresents the fathers in all their diversity but fails to understand Calvin's claims and context, a context in which Calvin's view did prove controversial not only among heretics but reformers.

Additionally, the Reformed tradition that followed did not, as a majority, adhere to Calvin's Trinitarianism. As Ellis has thoroughly demonstrated in his study, not all post-Reformation Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians would side with Calvin; in fact, most would disagree. Calvin's position proved to be the "minority report." The majority of Reformed would continue to side with that patristic stream that saw eternal generation as the communication of the divine essence.[90]

Although it is disagreeable that Warfield utilizes Calvin's doctrine to justify a dispensing with eternal processions, Warfield's overall evaluation is on target: Calvin's "contribution is summed up on his clear, firm, and unwavering assertion of the *autotheotes* of the Son. By this assertion the *homoousiotes* of the Nicene Fathers at last came to its full

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[89] It is worth noting that the Roman Catholic, Robert Bellarmine, who disagreed with Calvin, nevertheless did not think Calvin unorthodox. See Robert Bellarmine, "Secunda controversia generalis de Christo," in *Disputationum de controversiis Christiannae fidei adversus haereticos* (Rome, 1832), 1:307-10.

[90] "In no respect, therefore, did the Reformed mainstream assert *the Son's possession of deity from himself*—the white-hot heart of the conflagration started by Calvin. Indeed, it is absolutely vital for understanding the theological significance of the autothean controversies as a whole that *on all sides, except for the Calvinian minority report, personal procession was held to stand or fall with essential communication*." And again: "By the turn of the eighteenth century, according to mainstream reckoning the Calvinian Reformed minority account as I have described it here did not represent a distinct approach at all. ...the only approach to trinitarian formulation which did not assume that *personal procession fundamentally means essential communication*—from the traditionalists to the radicals—went into eclipse." Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son*, 168, 196.

right, and became in its fullest sense the hinge of the doctrine."[91] If Warfield is right that in Calvin we witness Nicaea coming "to its full right," then perhaps the more appropriate question is: Did Calvin advance traditional Trinitarianism, bringing it to its natural maturity? When one considers how Calvin combined his doctrine of eternal generation, particularly with its stress on personhood as opposed to essence, with his doctrine of autotheos, it is difficult not to answer in the affirmative. All things considered, Ellis appears justified to conclude that Calvin's Trinitarianism, as it relates to Nicene orthodoxy, possesses both "solidarity and complexity."[92]

IV. Balancing *sola Scriptura* and Catholic Trinitarianism as a necessary dogmatic tension

One of the dangers in historical studies is the tendency to paint pivotal figures simplistically. They always prove to be, however, inflexibly complex. Tensions play out in their own conduct; tensions evolve in their thinking as well. We should not assume that such tensions are necessarily problematic, always attempting to iron out what appears to modern eyes inconsistent or at odds. Nowhere does this apply more than in theological, dogmatic construction.

For example, the gospel itself is one grand tension: the power of God manifested in a crucified king. What is foolishness to the world is the power of God to save (1 Cor. 1:18). The foolishness and weakness of God has proved to be, in Christ, divine wisdom and strength (1 Cor. 1:25). Tensions, dialectics, and mysteries are at the very heart of the Christian faith, not because they remove the logic of truth (contra Neo-Orthodoxy) or the truthfulness of truth (postmodernism), but precisely because they accommodate the infinite Creator in his manifold truthfulness to finite, sinful creatures. Following Calvin, the Creator-creature distinction is the starting point, embracing the infinite, incomprehensible God in order to appreciate the way he has stooped so low as to lisp to feeble, rebellious babes.

Tension, in short, can be incredibly *Christian* in character and function. Could it be the case that tension might also be an indispensable

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[91] B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," 284.
[92] Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son,* 48.

ingredient in the recipe of theological method? Perhaps that is what is so problematic, from a Protestant perspective, with Roman Catholicism, the kind Calvin experienced in his day, whether it be Sadoleto or Caroli. It is far easier, much more comfortable, and considerably more understandable to simply say the unified tradition of the Catholic church is infallible, and appeal to the creeds for that is where inspired, final authority resides. Or in the case of the curialist, simply to invoke the authority of the pope. Whether a Roman conciliarist or curialist, one need not, at least in the final analysis, work out or work within the tension of biblical authority and catholicity. The Church, the mother who gave birth to the Scriptures, even bestowing authority upon the Scriptures, must simply be trusted. Here is Catholicity, but it is with a capital "C."

Calvin, however, is evidence that the Protestant methodology is radically different. *Sola Scriptura's* legitimacy will not allow voices of post-canonical humanity to have superiority over the voice of God himself in the Scriptures. Only the biblical witness is revelatory, God-breathed, inerrant, and therefore sufficient, having final authority in the church.[93] Evangelicals—as the reformers were first called—*must do* with Scripture, primarily because of what it inherently is and who it has as its divine author. If Calvin's repeated interruptions in the *Institutes,* which fearfully warn his readers not to play the philosopher, say anything at all, they communicate not only the seriousness with which he trembled at the infinite essence of God but his dedication to *sola Scriptura* not only as an ecclesiastical boundary but as a methodological tool. So often and so strong are Calvin's warnings, as well as his creedal resistance in the Caroli affair, that Calvin runs the risk of appearing inflexibly Biblicist, as untrue as such a conclusion might be.

Simultaneously, a Protestant methodology will not allow a radicalizing of *sola Scriptura,* one that turns the formal principle into *nuda Scriptura,* a tendency current among the radicals of Calvin's day and one equally current among evangelicals today. *Nuda Scriptura's* dismissal of tradition just as easily excuses "tension" as does Rome's appeal to an infallible tradition. Again, consider Calvin. Every time one grows impatient with Calvin's reticence to say anything beyond the words of

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[93] On Calvin's defence of *sola Scriptura,* see my treatment in *God's Word Alone,* 63-74.

Scripture, Calvin accelerates in his retrieval of patristic voices, earnestly voices his adherence to the creeds, and confidently verifies his indefatigable insistence upon his Trinitarian orthodoxy amidst the fires of controversy. While tradition may not be revelatory or inerrant, where it is faithful to the biblical witness and the implications of that biblical witness, it must be embraced, confessed, and considered authoritative. Recognizing its authority is not to swim the Tiber, but to acknowledge that where it is biblically pure it acts in a ministerial fashion, possessing a derivative authority that is always subservient to the one and only magisterial authority.

Nevertheless, if Calvin has actually made any contribution, then mere retrieval will not prove sufficient every time. As critical as the creeds may be, *sola Scriptura* may, in some circumstances, act as a license to bring to maturity either that which was left unaddressed by prior eras or that which was but in seed form. Theologians, therefore, need dogmatic wisdom, for it is very difficult to discern when the circumstances demand using that license. Doing so at the wrong time risks losing a catholic pedigree altogether.

Certainly, to some extent, the Reformation itself demonstrates that such a license is not only permittable but even responsible. The Reformers' doctrine of forensic justification and imputation was not, in the strict sense, a "new" doctrine in the church's tradition. One can find it embedded within the thought life of certain early church fathers.[94] Nevertheless, the political, ecclesiastical, and doctrinal climate in the first five centuries was not one that had justification at its center; Christ's deity would, understandably, have pride of place. While a forensic notion is not absent from the medieval era either, a transformative notion so dominated the penance system that the arrival of the sixteenth-century practically screamed for a reconsideration of man's right standing with God.

In that light, the reformers may have been retrieving the doctrine of justification, but given its speckled history up to that point, they did not merely retrieve but put forward the fullest doctrinal exposition in the history of the church, exploring questions and answers that had previously been untouched. That type of doctrinal formulation does not

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[94] For examples, see Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 105), 21-36.

mean the biblical witness is unclear and insufficient, in need of the church to formulate an authoritative, infallible office. If the church's misguided history on justification and authority proves anything it is that such was not the case, perhaps most painfully evident by the time of the Great Western Schism (1378-1417). Heresy and corruption so often impelled doctrinal development, not because a revelatory, infallible post-canonical tradition was needed to supplement Scripture's deficiencies, but rather because the biblical witness itself, which is not only shallow enough for a lamb to waddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim, either was muddied by mankind's doctrinal infidelity or unexplored due to mankind's doctrinal ignorance.

A similar point should be made with tradition. Not only do creeds and councils fail to be comprehensive in their articulation of doctrine, but even when their faithful, biblical formulation of doctrine is present, it is not to preclude further dogmatic maturity and refinement. As brilliant as Nicaea may have been, Chalcedon was deemed necessary, not only to correct misconceptions over vocabulary but to explore deeper the two natures of Christ in ways Nicaea had not. As time would tell, that became an imperative task as developing Christological heresies pounded on the church's door.

Calvin's Trinitarianism is not an exact parallel to the doctrinal development of justification mentioned above, in the least because Calvin does see himself as retrieving a notable and explicit stream of patristic thought, one that has ties back to Nicaea. Furthermore, Trinitarianism simply was not at the center of attention like the doctrine of justification was in the sixteenth-century. Nonetheless, as much as Calvin may have exercised a retrieval, his appropriation of autotheos, and with it eternal generation in terms of personhood, resulted in a fresh consideration. To call Calvin's doctrine of eternal generation and the Son's aseity a *mere* retrieval is to insult his genius. Tethered as he may have been to both Scripture and a certain stream of patristic thought that reached back to Nicaea, Calvin did argue in such a way that the wider implications of autotheos had to be considered with fresh eyes and from new vistas.[95] Did Calvin correct Nicaea-Constantinople? No. Did Calvin subtract from Nicaea-Constantinople? No. But did Calvin build upon

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[95] The centuries that followed would continue to explore the issue, proving that Calvin had touched a nerve, and one needing further clarification.

Nicaea-Constantinople? Certainly. Here is a building project, however imperfect, that attempted to balance *sola Scriptura* with catholicity.[96]

Dogmatics, then, is the attempt to think theologically while keeping one's feet on the ground that we call *sola Scriptura*. That presents a tension if there ever was one. Keeping one's feet firmly planted in the soil of *sola Scriptura* is a challenge when one must not only base one's claims on what Scripture says but reach high to follow through on what may be the "good and necessary consequence" to be "deduced from Scripture."[97]

Perhaps that explains Calvin's constant warnings against speculation, if only in part. He explores the divine essence, finding it necessary at points to move beyond Scriptural vocabulary into creedal vocabulary, which he must do if he is to grasp Scriptural ramifications in real time. Nevertheless, he feels the tension, mostly because that which is deduced from Scripture as a good and necessary consequence is still a *consequence* from Scripture, as necessary as that consequence may be.

The tension Calvin feels is one every theologian should feel: it is the attempt to build upon the shoulders we stand upon, while recognizing that some shoulders are stronger than others.[98] The construction site

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[96] Ellis uses the language of "advancing" and "developing" instead, though I believe to make a similar point: "Calvin's actual trinitarian views were not as unquestioningly traditional as is often claimed, nor, on the other hand, was his allegiance to *sola Scriptura* opposed to received creedal orthodoxy. Throughout his various controversies and in his writings on the Trinity, Calvin claimed to be promulgating and defending nothing other than, catholic Trinitarianism—and even some opponents of his autothean language concurred. But, again, many of the harshest critics of Calvin's views during his lifetime and afterwards were orthodox Trinitarians. …There is another way of evaluating the import of Calvin's Trinitarianism, which is to see his theology as marking a significant advance in the doctrine of the Trinity—not departing from or undermining classical language and exposition, or merely assenting to it, but developing it." Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son*, 7.
Ellis's thesis is made over against Warfield, whom Ellis both agrees and disagrees with, his disagreement being primarily concerned with the way Warfield uses Calvin's doctrine of the Son's aseity to move away from the notion of eternal generation altogether, as I've already noted above. See page 11.
[97] "The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)," 235 (I.VI).
[98] Paul Owen has his own way of saying something similar: "I certainly would affirm that the church not only *can,* but must, *build upon* the foundation of the

known as dogmatics is a process of building up. If we've learned from Calvin, catholic shoulders prove sturdy for such a task, keeping one focused on moving upward rather than looking down, wondering if those shoulders will prove dependable. At the same time, Calvin would remind us that the shoulders we stand upon are only as reliable as the foundation itself. Unless that foundation is the Scriptures, the theologian builds in vain.

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great creeds in order to apply their insights to contemporary theological issues. What I do not believe however, is that it is in keeping with the true spirit of the Reformation to *critique* the statements of Nicaea or Chalcedon especially; for the confessing church *stands under* the witness of those ecumenical councils. There is breathing room to operate *within* the boundaries of the Creeds (e.g., Lutheran vs. Reformed approaches to the two natures of Christ; East vs. West on the Trinity), and we surely can *add to* the creeds as the church is guided by God's Spirit; but we are in no position to *subtract* from the trinitarian and Christological confessions of the ancient church. Or at least, if we do, we can no longer claim substantial continuity with the aims of the mainstream Protestant Reformation." Owen, "Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism," 281 n. 60.