

A Reading Journal: 23 Days with John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

(John T. McNeill, ed., Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960)

Jonathan Andreas

Submitted on 28 June 2014 for CH 8.101 Calvin & Reformation of Life
Edinburg Theological Seminary

A Note to John Calvin

Dear John, may I call you John? Remember me? It's been a long time. As you may recall, I grew up revering you as one of the greatest Fathers of Christendom. Like Scripture, you were not to be questioned. Building on Augustine's wide shoulders, you laid the foundation for Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and the Christian Reformed Church. Your image is on the side of my Dordt College ring. I spent a semester studying your *Institutes* under Dr. John Vander Stelt back in the mid-80's. I've called myself a Calvinist for most of my life. Then I threw you and baby Jesus out with the bathwater about eight years ago. Since then, I've journeyed far and wide—theologically, religiously, philosophically—and, well, here I am, calling myself a Christian again (with fear and trembling). I wish we could pick up where we left off, but I'm afraid that's impossible. I'm a changed man. I've experienced things that have utterly changed (and continue to change) my life and worldview. Although I will always hold you in high esteem, let us now engage one another as equals, if not in intellect (for I cannot match you there) then in life experience and in radically creative thinking. [19 May 2014]

Introduction (by John T. McNeill) and **John Calvin to the Reader** (1559) and **Subject Matter of the Present Work**

• John, note 3 on page xxxi mentions translating *institutio* as “instruction” (cf. also xxxiii). I prefer that. An institute in my mind is a place of study. “Instruction in the Christian Religion” or “Lessons on Christianity” or, perhaps, more freely and anachronistically, “An Existential Faith” (cf. 36, n1). I toy with the English translation of your title because, frankly, I think it's an overly academic sounding turn-off. But that's just me. A little rhetorical PR never hurts. Besides, McNeill says you were coming to the aid of “grossly misrepresented” martyrs (xxxii), and you state that your work “is to help simple folk” to better understand God's Word (6) and that life is

not ordered according to reason alone (7, n8). A theological treatise (cf. xxxv, 4)? Perhaps. But maybe better a faith-filled testimony (cf. lii). McNeill says you reject “the intellectual indulgence of detached speculation” (li)—no needle-tip dancing angels for you, eh?

- I am surprised to read McNeill’s remark that “the focal point of the *Institutes* is not found in God’s sovereignty...” (lvi). I was raised to believe that your theology could be summarized in two words: God’s sovereignty. We shall see. [19 May 2014]

Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France and Book 1, Chapters 1 & 2

- John, I feel for you, brother, having to bow and scrape just to get the attention of an authority figure. I have to do that every day in my situation. Anyway, fine job. You plea not on your own behalf but for the sake of others, the church, and Christ’s truth (11). Your knowledge of the church fathers is impressive and you end with a challenge to the king himself. Very courageous!
- In book 1, ch. 1, you describe knowledge of self and God as interrelated. Which comes first? Or do they co-arise (cf. Ken Wilber)? I cannot think of a better opening for your opus than the mystery of epistemology: how we know what we are (human, *imago Dei*).
- “[R]eligion is born” from a “sense of the powers of God” and piety is “that reverence joined with love of God” (41). This is compatible with Jane Goodall’s observation of chimpanzees dancing before the power of a waterfall or staring into the beauty of a sunset. Also Joseph Campbell’s anthropological theories on the origins of aboriginal religions: being impressed by the power of nature. Reverence + joy. I often feel that (aboriginal) piety as I stargaze by night or watch the slow dance of the clouds by day.
- John, I’m disappointed that you brush off the question, “What is God?” (41). To avoid the ontological speculations of the Hellenists, sure, but it’s such a wonderfully metaphorical topic: “God is love,” “God is my rock,” and Jesus’ “the Father and I are one,” and “what you do for the least of these you do for me.” Jesus equates himself with the “least” *and* as one with God! Fertile soil indeed!
- I’m afraid your opinion of Epicurus has been overly influenced by Cicero (41). Did you have no access to Epicurus’ (or his disciples’) writings? He’s got some very interesting ideas. In my opinion, he and Jesus would have had a good time spending an afternoon together.
- “[A]ll men have a vague general veneration for God, but very few really reverence him...”(43). The same could be said for nature (try reading the quote again replacing “God” with “nature”)—to the great detriment of our planet and our progeny. [20-21 May 2014]

Book 1, Chs. 3-5

- Well. You begin ch. 3 saying that everyone has a “deep-seated conviction that there is a God” or at least a “sense of deity” (44). I can’t speak for everyone, but I know I do. But then you quickly (in chs. 4 & 5) attack all of humanity: “carnal stupidity” (47), “wickedness...fools... haughtiness” (48), “joining wickedness to wickedness” (50), “sluggishly lie in their own filth” (51), “devilish pride” (55), “stupidity and silliness” (64), need I go on? And calling people “the common herd” and “the dregs” (67)? I would expect as much from Nietzsche, but you?
- I do like your emphasis on the glory of creation (ch. 5): “there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his [God’s] glory” (52). But I disagree with your dour assessment of people. I and others have experienced God in a wide variety of ways and places. This comes back to your avoidance of the question, “What is God?” (41, as mentioned above).
- I’m sorry you think Lucretius is a “filthy dog” (58). I rather enjoyed his *De rerum natura* (in English).
- Nonetheless, putting aside our potential disagreement about the nature of God, your emphasis on finding evidence of the Creator in creation is important to a (Christian) religious understanding of the consequences of humanity’s destruction of many of the processes of that creation. It’s a finely-tuned instrument and we wantonly tinker with its fundamentals to our peril. We are not rulers *over* creation. We are caretakers from *within* creation. [22 May 2014]

Book 1, Chs. 6-12

- John, your high view of Scripture is admirable, but I fear you approach bibliolatry. This “most beautiful volume...clearly shows us the true God” (70). This singular volume is really a compendium of many different authors, several of whom had radically different experiences of God. One God, one Spirit? Sure, but I’m not convinced the Bible is “clear.” Today we have tens of thousands of Christian denominations (and sects and cults) all claiming to be Bible-based. Scripture may be inspired, inspirational, personal, moving, but clarity isn’t a word that comes to mind.
- I like your (borrowed) image of Scripture as an Ariadne’s thread with which we can dive into “the splendor of the divine countenance” (73). A thin and fragile gift that helps us navigate the mysteries of life.
- And then you jump into the thorny patch of individual vs. communal authority. “Scripture has its authority from God, not from the church” (74). But who speaks for God? The individual or the

church community? The Scriptures are the writings of individuals who were part of a community and whose writings were authenticated and preserved by that (Jewish and/or Christian) community. Later communities (e.g. church councils) reevaluated those decisions and created slightly different canons. Be careful, John, or you open the field to those with all sorts of psychological issues, all supposedly speaking for God. You know this already (cf. your ch. 9 on fanatics).

- I'm afraid I have to take issue with you when you say that no other writings/writers compare to Scripture, that its profundity eclipses all others (82). Even you admit parts of Scripture are written in "a rude and unrefined style" (83). I don't mind down-to-earth, but let's face it, some parts are downright boring (cf. Leviticus) or phantasmagorical (cf. Revelation). I have read many other books (and seen many movies) that have spoken to me of God's truth just as effectively (if not more so) than Scripture.

- "[T]he Jews, Christ's most violent enemies" (90)?! Seriously? How about "some Jews" or "a few Jewish leaders"? And more violent than the Roman soldiers who tortured and killed him? Come on, John, you're better than that.

- Your discussion of idols and images is interesting. "God's glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him" (100). I would agree—and yet do we have any other choice? God is, as you say, "incomprehensible" (104), and yet we comprehend God... somehow. The postmoderns have taught us that words (like Scripture) are not as static and objective as we (you?) once thought. Words are formed with concepts which are formed with the images and metaphors of our bodily experience. It's all connected, interrelated, all the way down. This is why I love it that you open your *Institutes* with the co-arising knowledge of God and self. In order for God to become real to us, to be experienced by us, God must enter us; God must become incarnate in our imagination via images and metaphors and concepts and words. So, John, we cannot help but "attach form" to God. Without it, we cannot know God.

- Finally (for today), your ideas on art are—how can I say this nicely?—antiquated, even for the 16th century: "only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing" (112). Hmm...I'll cut you some slack because I know you were trying to counter Greek humanism and Eastern and Romanist iconolatry, but whitewashing the churches of Geneva?

[23 May 2014]

Book 1, Chs. 13-14

• OK, John, it's time for a little chat. I've read the first 163 pages of your Institutes (plus the introductory stuff) over the past five days and am frankly appalled at your constant berating of others. Your writing is almost bipolar. When you're talking about God, your writing is poetic, even devotional; but when you're discussing pretty much anyone and everyone you disagree with, you're condescending, cruel, and petty. Was that the way people talked back in your day? Or are you a particularly bitter exemplar of the 16th century? Just to prove it to you, I'm going to keep track of all your slurs over the next 100 pages. My guess is that it's at least three times per page. Honestly, I can't point out your eye's sliver without admitting my own 2x4. I've always been judgmental (behind my beaming smile) and am constantly disappointed in others, but it has reached a fevered pitch since coming to prison. You write of dullness, stupidity, wickedness, and perversity (to name but a few)—I can relate! Prisoners and guards alike, I'm surrounded by uneducated, superstitious, foul-mouthed heathens—but I'm hesitant to put it into print. Should I indict your haughtiness, or praise your bare-knuckled honesty?

• “God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us” (121). Indeed, as the postmoderns have shown us, language is limited, and so are we when it comes to understanding the universe, the human mind, let alone God. God, in order to “accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity...must descend far beneath his loftiness” (121). It is for this exact reason that I think the discussions of Trinity and other aspects of God's “nature” (ch. 13ff.) must be taken with great care and respect for the limitations of our reason before the divine mysteries. “For thus are we wearied with quarreling over words, thus by bickering do we lose the truth, thus by hateful wrangling do we destroy love” (124). Amen!

• Essence, (*homo*)ousios, hypostasis, person, attribute, substance, subsistence (122ff.) are all bold (and reckless?) attempts to explain the ineffable. “One God in three persons” (cf. 144). *Persona* = *per* (through) + *sona* (sound) = sound through or speak through = an actor's mask (23, n7a). But one God with three masks is considered bad theology. At what point are we “wearied with quarreling over words”? How do we use words to capture that which is beyond words? I'm not suggesting giving up; I'm suggesting that we admit the limits of *theo-logic* and make greater use of *theo-poetics*. For example, the Jewish kabbalah has a fascinating origins myth (for how can we speak of things beyond our understanding without using mythic, symbolic, poetic language?). The *Ein Sof* (God's Godness beyond all comprehension) eternally expresses Itself as a divine Other and, in so doing, simultaneously expresses a Relationship (i.e. a third element) between Itself and the Other. The Hindus have have a similar myth and use the word

advaita (not divided, or nondual) to help explain the paradox of unity and diversity, or, in your words, “a distinction, not a division” (142). I wouldn’t go so far as to equate *Ein Sof* with Father, Other with Son, and Relationship with Spirit, but these myths help, I think, to flesh out our Judeo-Christian experience of God.

- As you say, “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?” (146).
- I’m sorry to say that I’ve never been much interested in angels (messengers) (ch.14, sections 31-2); however, the “fallen angel” Satan (the accuser) and the origin of evil are topics that have become more important to me as a convicted criminal trapped in an unjust and inhumane system. “[T]he devil was created by God,” you say, but “his nature...came not from his creation but from his perversion” (175). But what caused his perversion? This is not the place to open the theodicy can of worms, but suffice it to say, John, that I don’t find your arguments convincing. They’re too simplistic. They do not take Auschwitz into consideration (of course). God after Auschwitz? You say God “governs their [unclean spirits’] activity” (176). Did God govern the spirits at work among the Nazis? [24 May 2014]

Book 1, Chs. 15-18

- John, your discussion of the soul and its “essence,” of fantasy, reason, understanding, will, anger, desire (192-193) are in desperate need of an update from contemporary cognitive science. We have learned so much about how the brain works and how our decisions are influenced by our subconscious, and how that subconscious is formed by genetics, epigenetics, and society—it’s astounding! None of this rules out the “soul,” but I think a contemporary discussion is in order, one that does away with antiquated ideas and makes creative use of modern categories and concepts.
- Which, of course, leads us into the minefield (mindfield?) of free will and/or free choice. You write that Adam could have stood up to temptation but that he “was not given the constancy to persevere” (195). Why not? Will we be given that constancy in the hereafter? Why wasn’t it given to begin with? To allow Jesus to come, for God’s greater glory? Children became burnt sacrifices in Auschwitz for God’s greater glory? I’m not arguing against God’s existence or humankind’s wickedness. I just think this line of reasoning, this metanarrative, is exhausted. It’s

time to build our understanding of such mysteries in light of modern day experiences. “Our God, why have you abandoned us?”

- “[S]ome mothers have full and abundant breasts, but others’ are almost dry, as God wills to feed one more liberally, but another more meagerly” (201). Really? Infants are dying and families suffering “as God wills”? This line of reasoning to preserve God’s providence (or lack of providence in the latter child’s case) is morally bankrupt! We must share our experiences of God in a different way. Please.

- Similar to your earlier quote about “lispig” (i.e. motherese), you write, “For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us” (227). Come on, John, don’t you see it? “Not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.” I know God. I have been to hell and back with God. So have you. God doesn’t need to be described as a child killer. You get really hung up on control issues: God has to be in control of everything. Let it go.

[25 May 2014]

Book 2, Chs. 1-5

- Well, John, I’ve spent about 100 pages tracking your use of invectives and have determined two things: (1) to your credit, you only use them an average of between once and twice per page, not three times as I predicted, and (2) about half the time they are *ad hominem* attacks and the other half are your dour assessment of the human condition in general (i.e. synonyms for total depravity). All of which begs the question, what is your hang-up with such negativity focused on humanity? Yes, you and I have met our fair share of people only interested in their own power and in making others’ lives miserable, but have you never met an altruistic nonchristian or a selfless priest working with the poor? I know, I know, *solī Deo gloria*. Fine. I get it. You spend dozens and dozens of pages carefully protecting God’s glory from any diminishment, but don’t you want to hug that altruistic pagan, that helpful priest and tell them thank you? To congratulate them on their christlike service and on the excellent examples for others? On the many lives they’ve changed? You go on and on, explaining how all the good that we do comes from God, that it’s all a gift of God’s grace, and all the bad that we do is entirely our own fault. All good from God; all glory to God. All bad from us (or Satan); all condemnation on us. Scripture shows it both ways, as you outline in your counterarguments. You do a fine job presenting your case, but it’s based on the erroneous assumption that the Scriptures speak with

one voice. They do not, as Brueggeman (cf. his *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2012) clearly demonstrates. It can be argued that the Scriptures are inspired by one Source, but the reification of that Source's influence is always mediated by human experiences: *plural*, many different experiences. To use the Psalms and Romans (292), for instance, is to use two very different experiences of God (mediated through two different genres). I take no issue with your desire to protect God's glory, but you go too far. You make us sound like puppets: "God, wherever he wills to make way for his providence, bends and turns men's wills even in external things; nor are they so free to choose that God's will does not rule over their freedom. Whether you will or not, daily experience compels you to realize that your mind is guided by God's prompting rather than by your own freedom to choose" (315). John, no matter how sound your logic, the psychological effect of your line of reasoning is dangerous. One is tempted to say: Why even try? Anything I do is "impious, perverted, foul, impure,...infamous...[and] so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breathe out nothing but a loathsome stench" (340).

[26 May 2014]

Book 2, Chs. 6-9

- "[W]e cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he [God] is Father" (341). That's true. Other religions have developed all sorts of ways to relate to the divine, including seeing the gods as father, mother, et al., but none, as far as I know, has a covenanting father who relates (at times) in such a personal, loving manner. Of course, that's not to say that at times YHWH doesn't also resemble Zeus or Mithras et al.
- Incarnate gods (avatars) are nothing new or unique, but God coming in weakness is a curious happening: "unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot know that we are saved [healed]" (347). The question, of course, is who is the Christ, and what does the Christ represent. You come down hard on the "Turks" (Muslims) for "repudiating Christ" (348) but the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz belie a very christlike vision of the world.
- I appreciate your defense of the importance of the law in the lives of the ancient Hebrews and us today. Of course, "the whole cultus of the law, taken literally and not as shadows and figures corresponding to truth, will be utterly ridiculous" (349). There is a development of faith in people, both individually and communally, and what is often seen as literal at one stage is better understood as "shadows and figures" with more maturity. The Old Testament prophets (and Jesus!) demonstrate this mature understanding.

- “The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to arouse it to work” (361). You have such a way with words!
- The majority of today’s reading was the Ten Commandments, from the discussion of the two tables through the individual commandments themselves. Honestly, I think you spill too much ink on them; nonetheless, perhaps everyone would benefit from wrestling with the commandments (more than just the “Ten”) for a time.
- Regarding the sixth commandment (don’t kill), you write, “We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors’ lives, faithfully to employ it; if there is anything that makes for their peace, see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand” (404). Beautiful! Why don’t you write like this more often?
- In summary: “the purpose of the whole law: the fulfillment of righteousness to form human life to the archetype of divine purity” (415). And what does that divine purity look like? “[W]e ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves” (419). (Where is John Calvin and what have you done with him?) [27 May 2014]

Book 2, Chs. 10-15

- John, I appreciate your comparison of the two testaments of Scripture. As we both know, there are plenty of people who want to write off the Jews as one messiah short of salvation. Your look at both the similarities (ch. 10) and differences (ch. 11) between the Old and New Testaments is thorough and enlightening. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are full of signs and shadows, as you say, though I had never considered Noah’s ark experience as “a sort of grave for him for ten months,” and then you add (tongue-in-cheek?), “there can be nothing more unpleasant than to be confined so long—almost immersed in the dung of animals!” (436-437). Marvelous!
- I’m not sure I follow your emphasis on the afterlife of the Hebrews. My reading is that “everlasting” for them is found in both descendants and land. The personal hereafter is less of a concern. Judaism is an earthy, hear-and-now religion.
- I can’t speak for your Jewish contemporaries, but I did study and worship with Reform Jews for more than a year, and I can tell you their applied faith life is, at best, not only beautiful and inspiring but also quite “reformational” in the (Kuyperian) sense of bringing God’s kingdom (what

they call the messianic age) of justice, love, and mercy into today's world—with little or no concern about the afterlife. My rabbi called Jesus the first Reform Jew.

- What I do like, and think ought to be extended further, is the idea of a (personal and communal) maturing faith (as mentioned above). “Paul likens the Jews to children, Christians to young men [Gal. 4:1ff.]” (462-463). I would define young men here as frisky adolescents and then ask: what about the further stages (of faith life)?

- Your discussion of Jesus as true God and true man is one that I'm quite familiar with.

Nonetheless, it's interesting to review your counterarguments vs. others' ideas on the mystery of Jesus' being. [28 May 2014]

Book 2, Ch. 16—Book 3, Ch. 2

- John, you begin ch. 16 with more negativity against humanity: “No one can descend into himself and seriously consider what he is without feeling God's wrath and hostility toward him” (504). I'm sorry but that's not my experience. I've always marveled at the creation that is me—and others! People have so much good in them—even murderers and rapists. I've always tried to see the best in people, and when horrific things happen (splashed all over TV every day), my first reaction is, “What went wrong with that person? Why did he or she feel that was the right thing to do?” Not: (God's) wrath and hostility! I am dumbfounded that we want to throw people away in prisons for decades (or kill them) in this country instead of trying to genuinely *help* them.

- Thank goodness you come around and quote Augustine: “he [God] loved us even when he hated us” (507). That's a little better. Yet how can you hate your children (or anyone really)? Disappointment, momentary anger, sure, but hate? I reserve my hate for systemic evil, for institutional injustice that needs to be fought against.

- I can't help but wonder if you would like the Mel Gibson film, *The Passion*. So much focus on pain and suffering and blood and God's wrath. What about Jesus' *life*? What about his compassion on the ostracized, on society's rejects?

- I think there's much value in relating to “Christ's weakness” (518), especially in light of his fight against and inability to overcome the institutional injustice of his day. I can relate to that! But why must you/we so quickly defend his majesty? Christ's weakness “does not in the least detract from his power” (518). You feel the need to explain that “the divine power of his Spirit remained hidden for a moment to give place to weakness of flesh” (519). For a moment? Jesus' whole life, from swaddling clothes to Golgotha, was a big failure from the point of view of the

power centers of his day. There is “power” in weakness! Jesus may have had legions of angels ready to attend to him, but he chose the simple life of love and compassion. How about a theology of weakness?

- This same principle of weakness applies to faith. Although you admit to “divers [*sic*] forms of faith” (553) and that “the meaning of the word ‘faith’ is ambiguous” (558) in Scripture, you conclude that real faith “requires full and fixed certainty” (560). Are you so certain? Apparently not. You of all people should recognize the inconstancy of the human mind. You admit: “we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety” (562). At times, “its light is snuffed out. Yet whatever happens, it ceases not its earnest quest for God” (571). That is exactly my experience. [29 May 2014]

[30 May-1 June 2014. Skin Cancer Surgery and Recovery.]

Book 3, Chs. 3-6

- The “frenzied excess” of the Anabaptists has not changed a bit. Whether it’s the opulent nonsense on TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network) or the dark rap endlessly played on the Christian music channel, “what sort of Spirit do they belch forth?” (606). It’s a spirit of distraction, of self-aggrandizement at the expense of others. It’s sick.
- I’m curious, John, about your Platonic anthropology—“so long as we dwell in the prison house of our body” (614)—where did you pick that up? It’s Hellenistic, not Hebraic.
- You call the idea that “those who imagine that they can return to the Christian religion even though they had once departed from it” a “false and pernicious opinion” (619), but based on what? This is, of course, the “P” from the later popularized Calvinist TULIP: perseverance of the saints. However, it’s not my experience. A decade ago, I would’ve died for my (Calvinian Christian) faith; five years ago I was calling myself an atheist; and today I find Jesus as inspiring and moving as ever! Others have tried to twist my experience to fit their doctrine, but what I experienced was a faith crisis, then loss of faith, then utter abandonment (for years), and then an unexpected deepening and redefining of faith. I would call it (along with Ken Wilber) a religious maturation.
- I had to laugh when you called your *Institutes* a “short textbook” (622)!
- I have been worshipping on and off with our Catholic brethren for years now and one of the reasons I can’t formally join them is their insistence on confession. Your treatment of that topic (ch. 4) is one that I largely agree with. For instance, in section 16, you ask, “Are all sins to be

recounted?” (641). When there’s a long line outside the confessional, how many sins do you confess? Just the big ones? Where’s the line between big and small? I like Jesus’ advice, before you go to bed at night or bring an offering to the table, go make things right with (confess to!) the ones you’ve injured.

- You will also get no argument from me regarding indulgences and purgatory (ch. 5).

[2-3 June 2014]

Book 3, Chs. 7-14

- I’d like to start with ch. 9, “Meditation on the Future Life,” and then back up if you don’t mind, because I feel strongly that this is the core of our disagreement. You say we should have “contempt for the present life,” avoid our “brutish love of this world,” and do not seek our “happiness on earth” (712). Echoing Plato, you ask, “what else is the body but a prison?” (716) and declare our body to be “this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle” (717). You’re wrong, John, terribly wrong, as God says over and over again in Genesis 1: “good...good...very good.” Admittedly, you try to lighten your condemnation of this life—a gift of God (720)—in ch. 10, but a mere few pages doesn’t balance your ongoing derision of this life, this world, throughout your opus. I fear you’ve bought into the Hellenistic idea of here-is-bad vs. there-is-good as opposed to *all* of creation as a *good* reflection of the Creator. You say it yourself, *evil* is not a separate entity on par with God, but a mere perversion of the good creation. That includes *us*, John. You say everyone strives for heavenly immortality. Not me. Forget heaven. No celestial choirs for me. I’m holding out for the messianic kingdom that the Jewish prophets—including Jesus!—foretold, not some Platonic neverneverland. Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not after “riches, power, and honors” or “avarice, ambition, and lust” (712). I’m looking for community, romance, music, laughter, children, animals, walks in the forest and swimming in the ocean. I love this planet, this life. I love *my* life—yes, even this one that I’ve screwed up so badly that I’m in prison. It’s still full of love (from many people I wouldn’t have known without coming to prison), music, friendship, and a deepened sense of self and God (and Life-in-God) that I wouldn’t trade for a thousand heavens. Does that make me “enmeshed in the allurements of the flesh” (712)? I don’t know what happened to you, John, to make you hate this life/world so much, but the sheer beauty of it all can move one to weep with joy in Jesus’ very flesh-and-blood arms!

- Ch. 7 is self-denial, self-renunciation, lowliness, taming and subjugating the heart; and ch. 8 is God restraining our arrogance by afflicting “us either with disgrace, or bereavement, or disease,

or other calamities” (703). Really? God wants people to watch their children die of a disease in order to keep their arrogance in check? Oh, there’s another reason for afflictions: “to test [our] patience and to instruct [us] to obedience” (704). I’ve got news for you, John, such things also frequently drive people *away* from God.

- Your extreme misanthropy affects even your analysis of righteousness: “man cannot without sacrilege claim for himself even a crumb of righteousness, for just so much is plucked and taken away from the glory of God’s righteousness” (764-765). Come off it, John. It’s only a zero sum game in the sterile laboratory of a theologian’s mind. *Real life* righteousness, doing things (morally) good and right, is something every parent and teacher should recognize and praise in a child. That is neither sacrilege nor stealing anything from God, and you know it. [4 June 2014]

Book 3, Chs. 15-19

- This marks the end of the first volume, an achievement that merits great things in God’s sight. I’m kidding! Come on, loosen up, John. Ch. 15 is about that offensive and damaging term “merit.” I don’t disagree with you; people counting up their merits for reward here-and-now or in the hereafter are on the wrong track. But here you go again, counting up our demerits: that each of us “only...pollutes and contaminates by [our] impurity those very things which were good” (790-791). For goodness sake, if I ran my classroom like that, I’d be accused of child abuse.

- After 800 pages of your ideas, I’m growing weary of your juridical metaphor/paradigm. All this protection of God’s honor and Christ’s righteousness means a counterweight of human and worldly worthlessness. All this imputation, sanctification, justification, etc. reeks of the courtroom (a place I hope never to see again!)—not unlike the sterile, sanitized smell of the laboratory of modernism that came after your time. I realize many of these legal distinctions come from Scripture itself (and Paul the theologian-jurist), and your legally-trained mind resonates like a finely-tuned instrument, but surely holding court in God’s throne room isn’t the only analogue we can use. I wonder, for instance, if we can better communicate these same biblical concepts (*life* concepts) using life itself writ large: the ecosystem. From the royal courtroom to the rainforest? The interconnectedness and interdependence of all things....

- “Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God’s sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ’s purity, and is

not charged to our account” (813). Engrafted: there’s a biological term, a hinge on which we might swing our confessional door in a new direction.

• You say the “whole end” of Scripture “is to restrain our pride, to humble us, cast us down, and utterly crush us” (824). There you go again! That’s not how I read Scripture at all. Does it have those condemning aspects? Of course. But the Bible as I read it is a Book of Life, a profoundly inspiring quilt of people’s interactions with and experiences of life, creativity, love, justice, mystery as found in their God. I believe its “whole end” is to awaken us from our stupor and remind us that we are, each one of us, beautiful *imago Dei* creations! [5 June 2014]

Book 3, Chs. 20-21

• Ch. 20 is on prayer, a topic that I have particularly wrestled with since returning to Christianity. The mystery of a direct interface with the divine is something often made too facile, or at least taken for granted, in my opinion. You describe “an extra-ordinary peace and response to our consciences” (851)—and to our consciousness, I would add. My practice of Buddhist meditation and its Christian cousins, centering prayer and contemplative prayer (cf. Fr. Thomas Keating), kept me (spiritually) alive during the dark years when I had felt abandoned by God. What you describe as “amidst our prayers we neglect him [God] and flit about hither and thither” (854) is called the “monkey mind” in Zen Buddhism. Hence the need for a centering discipline of gently bringing one’s focus back to God, as often as necessary.

• The intercession of the saints (879ff.) is an interesting idea, isn’t it? As I’ve said, my worship over the past dozen years of incarceration has been mainly with the Catholics (due to the pathetic nature of the Protestant services), so praying to/through the saints is something I’ve seen a lot of—and remain mystified by. Like you, I wonder if the saints have nothing better to do, and why praying straight to God in Jesus’ name isn’t good enough. Is using a saint in this way a holdover from a (pagan) “tutelary deity” (880) or are these people “confus[ing] dead saints with angels” (881)?

• As a lifelong church musician, I’m quite familiar with your “words first” philosophy of congregational singing, i.e., “our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words” (895). As I like to say, the music should carry the words. I’ve been the music leader/cantor for most of my prison years (for both Catholic and Jewish services) and try to live by your words, John, every week.

• Your exposition of the six petitions of the “Our Father” is familiar, but I think you skirt the issue of God’s *leading* us into temptation/evil. You say Satan does the leading, but that’s not what the

prayer says: “lead us not into temptation” is, as I read it, an imperative plea with the implied “you” referring to God, not to Satan.

- The “covenant of life” (920): I like that. Ch. 21, on predestination, is not as shocking as I thought it might be. To put it bluntly, some people “get it” (i.e., the deeper issues of life) and others don’t. I don’t like it—who does?—that some people just never seem to understand what life is *really* about, just seem to drift through life pursuing the shallow, animalistic needs (food, sex, status, sleep, etc.), but what can be done about it? It shouldn’t stop us from trying to teach the truth and from trying to help bring God’s kingdom of love, peace, justice, etc. What I don’t like is your condemnation of “excess curiosity.” “[I]t is not lawful for mortal men to intrude upon the secrets of God,” you say. “We should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret” (925). Oh, relax, for goodness sake! As if we *could* unlock God’s secrets. I say explore, learn, discover, find out everything you can about life and the universe, ask lots of questions! [6 June 2014]

Book 3, Chs. 22-25

- Predestination is indeed a fascinating topic. Among today’s scientists, some 80% or more (as I recall) consider themselves materialists and, when push comes to shove, “hard” materialists (source: *Skeptic* magazine article read last year). A hard materialist is one who believes that every subatomic particle acts in a predictable manner according to the laws of physics; therefore, from the Big Bang forward, everything is theoretically predestined. So, in today’s world, predestination doesn’t just belong to the Calvinists, but to mainstream philosophy of science as well. In both Calvinian and materialist predestination, it is argued—as you do, John—that we are still responsible for our actions since we can’t know, on the one hand, God’s will, or, on the other hand, the movement of every subatomic particle in the universe. All of which is to say, predestination shouldn’t be such a scary topic among modern educated people.

- Also, the idea of the elect and the reprobate is a matter of commonsense, everyday experience. The fact that some people “get it” (whatever “it” is) and others don’t (as mentioned above) is not necessarily related to intelligence or even age—although it may have something to do with cultural upbringing/worldview/context. The difficulty with the idea of a predestined elect and reprobate comes not with the third-person (“it”) impersonal universe, or with the first-person (“I”) open- or closed-mindedness, but with a second-person (“you,” i.e. God) deciding (or willing) in advance what each one of us will decide regarding, in this case, faith in God. John, you argue mightily—but not convincingly, in my opinion—that God personally deciding for us (my words)

our ultimate destiny (1) does not take us off the hook for choosing against God, (2) should be openly preached from the pulpit because (3) it puts the focus on God's glory and away from any erroneous notions of man's merits. No, John, I don't buy it. All of it still comes down to: we are (moral) puppets, God is pulling the strings, yet we are responsible for our choices/actions. That does *not* glorify God; it makes God into a tyrant. On pages 949-951 you attempt to defuse the tyrant accusation with the following circular reasoning: God's will is righteous because God is righteous, and asking any further questions is "unlawful." Sorry, John, not good enough.

[7-8 June 2014]

Book 4, Chs. 1-7

- Church history so often teaches that you and the other Reformers broke away from the Catholic Church, but you make it clear that there is only ever one universal/catholic church with one Head, Jesus Christ (1014). From your perspective, the corrupt hierarchy of Rome had already left the true church. You call church-splitting a "detestable...attitude" (1019). The "church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations" (1023) marked by "their preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments" (1024). And you're clear that the church is never a gathering of perfect people, not in this life (1029ff.). I agree with your comparison between the Old Testament priestly temple cult and the Vatican (1043ff.). There is a powerful and mysterious beauty surrounding certain places and structures (I experienced that at La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona), and vestments and rituals and music can invoke an otherworldly awareness (in many religions), but the question of the "true" church is one to be dealt with carefully.

- Your explanation of the various roles within the church is very thorough. "[O]nly those are to be chosen who are of sound doctrine and of holy life..." (1063). No "noisy and troublesome men" (1062) or women! The laying on of hands, self-ordination (e.g., Paul, 1064), the changing role of deacons, the corruption of bishops, the "tyranny of the papacy" (1084). I've been generally fond of the Pope during my lifetime (for a Protestant), especially the current Pope Francis. He may not be an active bishop, as you critique, John, but he does a fine job of putting a single, relatively humble face on a worldwide religion. Of course, as you say, quoting the church fathers, if that one man falls, so does the reputation of the whole church. On the other hand, we live in such an individualistic age that people are rarely equated with their organization. People fall all the time, but the institutions often remain unaffected (current e.g., the scandal with the owner of the L.A. Clippers).

• I really appreciate your well-researched history of the papacy. The fact that the bishop of Rome was just one of many for the longest time makes sense to me. But politics being what it is, it was bound to become a power grab at some point. I believe Jesus would be quite upset at the current state of Christianity if he were walking around today—just as he was with the Jewish religion of his day. [9 June 2014]

Book 4, Chs. 8-11

• On pages 1150 & 1215 you clearly separate the powers of the church and the magistrate, and I see the glimmers of Kuyper’s sphere sovereignty.

• Ch. 8 is about purity of doctrine, a fuzzy concept if there ever was one. The big question is, of course, who speaks for God? You point to Moses and the prophets: “they are to speak nothing but his [God’s] Word” (1151). Does that mean every word they ever spoke (which we cannot know), or just when they were in the Spirit, or just those remembered by oral tradition, and/or those recorded and recopied in countless scriptural manuscripts? You say that only “filth and folly” (1152) would’ve come from Jeremiah’s lips if he hadn’t been the instrument of the Holy Spirit. The “apostles” spoke with similar authority, but which ones? Only the canonical ones? What about the extracanonical ones? You speak of the “Holy Spirit’s dictation” (1154) but what do we do with biblical criticism’s questions of biblical inaccuracies? You say “the mouths of all men should be closed when once he [Jesus] has spoken” (1155). Does that include the 1500 pages of your writings attempting to explain Scripture for “simple minds”? Do we go to church and only read God’s Word and never comment on it? You critique the Roman councils (also in ch. 9) for “coin[ing] dogmas after their own whim” (1159), but from whence comes the dogmas of the Trinity and of Christ’s ontology when these things are not explicitly delineated in Scripture? Whose dogmas are whimsical, the good church councils’ (1166), the bad ones’ (1172ff.), or the heretics’ (1176f.)? And who determines good, bad, and heretical? The majority of church leaders, the emperor, the politically savvy? As you well point out, the evolution of the Christian church from its earliest days is far from neat and clean. Yet you confess: “the Lord is ever present with his people and governs them by his Spirit” (1160). I would say: where the Holy Spirit “governed” (and continues to govern) is largely a matter of perspective. You say that “the church cannot err in matters necessary to salvation...in so far as [it] allows itself to be taught by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word” (1162). Easier said than done! John, you haven’t had the pleasure of living through postmodernism, but one of their tenets is “it’s hermeneutics all the way down.” And so, the writer of Scripture, interpreting his

experience of God, is, in turn, interpreted by the preacher who, in turn, was trained by a certain school of interpretation, and who, in turn, is interpreted by the person in the pew, etc. So, once again, who speaks for God? We all do, together, more or less, some more than others. And so, statements like, “If you’re not with us, you’re against us,” are pathetically childish. Says who? Says me, governed by the Holy Spirit—or so I desperately hope (with fear and trembling). “The whole case rests upon this: if God is the sole lawgiver, men are not permitted to usurp this honor” (1186). Amen! Yet how do we interpret God’s laws to make them relevant for today?

- You’re obviously not keen on “the theatrical props that the papists use” (1206), and I don’t blame you; they’re not for everyone. But I think you underestimate the good-created aesthetic power of beauty and ceremony on the human psyche. Today’s over-saturated multimedia world(view) is a clear demonstration of a good thing gone awry, and maybe you felt that way about the media-soaked churches of your day—but don’t whitewash it all, please.

- “[L]ove will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe” (1208). Where is my friend John and what have you done with him? “Let love be our guide”? What, did you watch a Disney movie or something? Bravo! I knew you had it in you somewhere! And then, on page 1209, you show a tender flexibility for those who may break the letter of the law due to “imprudence or forgetfulness.” Now *that* is what I call Christlike!

[10 June 2014]

Book 4, Chs. 8-11

- Ch. 12 is about church discipline. Growing up in the Christian Reformed Church, I can’t recall ever seeing any public admonition or ever hearing of someone being excommunicated. Perhaps in today’s world, one can simply leave one church/denomination and find another that better suits one’s taste? I don’t recall any really offensive people in my youth, but I’ve met plenty here in prison! (Somehow, they seem to work their way into leadership positions in the Protestant Chapels.) Anyway, I can understand wanting to weed them out eventually (unless they radically change) to prevent the spread of their unwanted ideas and actions (1231). Your emphasis on a gentle, loving correction is, frankly, a surprising yet welcome explanation (1237).

- I like your treatment of fasting, not as an empty ritual or superstitious draw on God’s power, but as a spiritual tool to “render [oneself] more eager and unencumbered for prayer” (1242). Nothing like trying to pray on a full stomach—and falling asleep!

- Ch. 13 on vows is almost as long as ch. 14 on the sacraments! Was vowing that big of a deal back then, because it certainly isn't today? People change their minds (and commitments) all the time nowadays. Maybe it's a sign of the times—a lack of integrity.
- Your critique of monasticism in your day is harsh. I do know that it was a mixed bag. But don't forget that the "idle" (1264) monks were the ones that helped to "save civilization" with all their text copying. Yes, our "hooded friends" (1270) may seem to flee the world (1271), but sometimes that's the only way to preserve (an important part of) the world.
- In your discussion of the sacraments, you mention "the priest mumb[l]ing the formula of consecration" (1279). I've witnessed that (not too often, thank goodness) and it is truly a sham(e). But, as you say, even if the giver of the sacrament messes it up and/or the recipient is unprepared to receive the gift, the sacramental "seal of divine good" (1299) does not decline in meaning or value, which is ultimately found and realized in the one who does faithfully receive that "image" of Christ (1296), who makes that faithful connection.
- With baptism, similarly, "we obtain only as much as we receive in faith" (1315). I agree that it would be better "to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eyes of the simple and deadens their minds" (1319). Today I believe the Protestants are every bit as guilty, if not more so, than the Catholics. Baptism is a beautiful, simple, natural event; we ought to keep it that way. [11 June 2014]

Book 4, Chs. 16-17

- Thirty-six pages on infant baptism? Really? How many pages in the entire Bible are about baptism, and infant baptism in particular? I'm quite familiar with the anagogic relationship between circumcision and infant baptism—I grew up defending it among my non-Reformed friends—but, I'm sorry, the older I get, the less important it seems to me.
- Now, the concept of "spiritual infancy" (1334) I find more interesting. It seems to me that orthodox Christianity could learn a thing or two from other religions (e.g., Buddhism and western esoteric Christianity) regarding levels/stages of spiritual development, akin to lifelong stages of (adult) psychological development. Never have I met so many psychological, emotional, and spiritual "adolescents" well into adulthood (their 40s, 50s, 60s, etc.) than here in prison. In fact, I think incarceration and rehabilitation should be completely rethought in terms of im/maturity, but that's a topic for another day. The church in America simply reflects the surrounding culture, as is too often the case. In America, you're a kid till about age 18, then struggle to maintain your youthfulness as a so-called adult until about 50 or 60, at which time you look pathetic doing so

and (hopefully) give up and start acting your age. The church is no different. Except for a few church-nerds who actually read theology, most parishioners simply look for a comfortable community. Who can blame them? They're still emotional adolescents and need a sense of belonging—and any church-nerds who question the way “things have always been” are made to feel uncomfortable until they eventually (and thankfully!) leave. Which brings us to the Lord's Supper.

- John, I think you've got a better handle on the role of the Lord's Supper with regard to spiritual maturity than we do today. Indeed, it is meant “to nourish us throughout the course of our life” (1360). Admittedly, it is a “high mystery” (1360) and “incomprehensible” (1361), and a lot of ink has been spilled by you and others throughout the ages trying to comprehend it—most of which I find a bit ridiculous (not unlike discussions of baptism)—but the analogy of spiritual food and drink *to help us grow* is very important. Unfortunately, spiritual growth is often narrowly understood and thereby measured in mundane externals such as swearing less often, not lusting after wo/men so often, etc., when it should be focused on a real *change of heart*, that is, personality, worldview, habits of thinking, etc. The externals will flow from that. Those changes are difficult, require personal suffering, doubt, and a re-forming of the self. Buddhism and modern psychology—to name but two—are rich with insights into those things, but we ignore them because they're not Christian. Have we forgotten common grace?

- Growing up (spiritually, emotionally, psychologically) is a great mystery and, as you say, weekly portions (1421, 1424) of that spiritual food and drink are necessary for leaving behind the comfort zones of our childhood/adolescence. [12 June 2014]

Book 4, Chs. 18-20

- You know, John, I've sat through a lot of Catholic masses since coming to prison, and I've known about the difference between transubstantiation and your view, but it wasn't till reading ch. 18 on the mass as a sacrilege that I really put it all together. The role of the priest predates the ancient Israelites and in all cases presides over the bloody sacrifice to appease God (or the gods). In the daily Catholic mass, Christ, as a sacrificial lamb (*agnus Dei*), is not allowed to rest but instead is “cruelly slain in a thousand places at every moment” (1434). Of course, I don't see it that (transubstantial/Catholic) way. To me, their whole argument rests on Hellenic (not Hebraic) ontology. Honestly, I'm not sure the ancient Hebrews even had much of a formal ontology, more like a common sense intuition that the body is made of earthstuff and is animated by God's lifebreath. The idea of external appearance versus hidden true being is

nonsense: bread is bread and wine is wine (cf. 1391). All else is Platonism. And yet, these symbols/analogies/images are no mere remembrance (cf. Zwingli). A memory brings with it feelings, but the aesthetic power of a properly enacted ritual (i.e., a metaphor in motion) has the potential (for good or for ill) to change a person's life. For me, the trans-, con-, whatever-substantial debate is a lot of Hellenic hot air. And Jesus' life and death is no mere (warm and fuzzy) memory-feeling. A proper understanding of his sacrifice (in both life and death) is necessary for a regular (weekly) re-formation of the Christian self.

- As for the five other so-called sacraments (confirmation, marriage, last rites, etc.), you'll get no argument from me. As you say, if we sacramentalized everything Jesus and the apostles and the saints did (1450), there would be an absurd, laughable (1471) number of sacraments! Yes, John, you have "pulled the lion's skin from these asses" (1484)! Ha!

- Just when we were having such a great time together, you had to end your *Institutes* with the ridiculous notion that civil authorities are not to be despised (1518), indeed, they are to receive our "highest degree" of "reverence" (1516) no matter how wicked they are: "drain[ing] the common people of their money..., robbery, plundering houses, raping virgins and matrons, and slaughtering the innocent" (1512); and that because "Scripture reckons all such calamities among God's curses" (1513) "it will not be [our] part to restrain it; [we] will have only this left to [us]: to obey their commands and hearken to their word" (1514). Are you insane? No, no, no, John. A thousand times no. Here we must part ways. I will go with Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. I will stand against injustice in word and deed. I will not stand idly by and watch the U.S. mistreat thousands of Central American refugee children, for example, without speaking out and calling it what it is: a crime against humanity (especially considering that we are *directly* responsible for manipulating those very countries' economies to our benefit). I regret having to leave you on this sour note, but if there is any reason why I follow Jesus, it's because of his absolute intolerance for injustice. Indeed, John: God be praised! [13 June 2014]