

From Ignominy to Glory:¹ Jesus's Death and Resurrection in Calvin's *Harmony of the Gospels*

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Abstract

In the final fifty pages of Calvin's *Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels* the Reformer expounds, in eleven sets of parallels, the Synoptic accounts of Jesus's death and resurrection (Matt 27:45–28:20, Mark 15:33–16:20, and Luke 23:45–24:53). This article seeks to commend the usefulness of Calvin's exposition for contemporary readers by means of a digest in which significant elements for each section are drawn out, their chief exegetical and theological emphases highlighted, and the main qualities of Calvin's work identified. The conclusion considers both the merits and limits of Calvin's harmonization, offering suggestions on how scholars and believers might complement Calvin when reading or studying the Synoptic Gospels today.

¹ My title draws on Calvin's own words: he calls Jesus's burial (Matt 27:57–61 & par.) "a transitional passage from the ignominy of the cross to the glory of the resurrection." John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison and T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1972), 3:215–16; hereafter simply *Harmony*.

Introduction

In the summer of 1555 John Calvin published a lengthy and energetic *Harmony* of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in Latin and French simultaneously.² In its introduction Calvin expresses his debt to Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg Reformer whom he assisted for three formative years and whose 1527–28 commentary on the Gospels Calvin is self-consciously emulating: “I freely confess ... that the method derives from imitation of others. I have particularly copied Bucer, that man of holy memory, outstanding doctor in the Church of God, whom I judge to have pursued a line of work in this field which is beyond reproach ... [and whose] industry and research have given me considerable assistance.”³

Attempts at bringing the Gospels’ individual portrayals of Jesus together into one more or less continuous account largely ceased in the post-Enlightenment period, with harmonization giving way to differentiation. Today we are accustomed to discerning and prizing the distinctive notes and cadences in each evangelist’s unique melody for representing Jesus’s words and deeds; we appreciate their counterpoint and enjoy their polyphony. The unison singing characteristic of Calvin’s *Harmony* is correspondingly unfamiliar, perhaps even unexpected: for while substantial agreement typifies the heart of the Synoptic testimony,⁴ the unique perspectives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also join with those of John to enhance and enrich a blended diversity in the fourfold Gospel expounded, celebrated, and applied in Reformed churches today.

By means of the following digest of the closing fifty pages of the *Harmony*, I hope to capture the essence of Calvin’s approach and illustrate its enduring value for contemporary readers of the Gospels.⁵ In my conclusion I will then reflect briefly on how to compensate for its limitations. I have reflected on Calvin’s *Harmony* and its portrayal of Jesus before, surveying the Reformer’s treatment of five prominent phases in the Synoptic story of Jesus: the

² *Harmonia ex tribus Euangelistis composita, Matthaeo, Marco & Luca*; and *Sur la Concordance ou Harmonie composée de trois évangélistes, àçavoir S. Matthieu, S. Marc et S. Luc*. Morrison and Parker’s translation is from the Latin, whose final edition appeared in 1563. For the French I have consulted the 1561 French edition by Conrad Badius, Geneva (republished; Paris: Librairie de Ch. Meyrueis et Compagnie, 1854–55), available online at <http://www.unige.ch/theologie/cite/calvin/CommentairesNT.html>; Badius, in 1562, also published sixty-five sermons preached subsequently by Calvin on his *Harmony*.

³ *Harmony*, xiv. He acknowledges, nonetheless, that his exegesis may disagree with Bucer’s!

⁴ As is well known, impressive agreement in both the wording and the ordering of material characterizes both the triple tradition (or Synoptic core) and the additional material common to both Matthew and Luke.

⁵ Calvin explicitly invites readers to judge its worth. *Harmony*, xiv.

infancy narratives, the early ministry, the Sermon on the Mount or Plain, the later ministry, and Jesus's passion (up to and including the crucifixion).⁶ I found that the red thread running through Calvin's composite portrayal of the evangelists' one Jesus is his resolute prioritizing of *the work of Christ for us and in us*: from the Gospels springs the gospel, with its pressing existential claims upon the reader, so that Christ the Mediator and Redeemer is also ours to be loved, imitated, and obeyed.⁷

Calvin expounds the death and resurrection of Jesus in eleven sets of parallels, accompanying the printed texts with a continuous commentary. In my digest below the applicable portions of the Gospels are in brackets, while a subtitle alerts readers to the main events involved in each section.⁸ Covering Matthew 27:45–28:20,⁹ Mark 15:33–16:20, and Luke 23:45–24:53, their subject matter moves from the death of Jesus to the women's flight from the empty tomb (in Mark), through the resurrection appearances narrated by Matthew or Luke (read in tandem with the longer ending of Mark 16:9–20), to the conclusions of these two Gospels.

Digest

1. *Jesus's Death* (Matt 27:45–56; Mark 15:33–41; and Luke 23:44–49)

Calvin begins with the phenomena highlighted only by Matthew (Matt 27:45) as occurring *from the sixth hour*¹⁰ to the ninth, seeing in them “superb

⁶ Gordon Campbell, “Jesus of Geneva: Has Calvin's Redeemer Got Contemporary Relevance?,” in *John Calvin: Reflections on a Reformer*, ed. T. D. Alexander and L. S. Kirkpatrick (Belfast: Union Theological College, 2009), 77–87, and subsequently also, translated into Calvin's native French, “Jésus de Genève’: Pour le Rédempteur de Calvin, quelle pertinence aujourd’hui?,” *La Revue réformée* 61.4 (2010): 83–96. I revisited the topic in Gordon Campbell, “Jesus of Geneva. Encountering Christ with Calvin in the Gospels,” in *Living in Union with Christ in Today's World: The Witness of John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola*, ed. Brendan McConvery (Dublin: Veritas, 2011), 57–74.

⁷ For more detailed assessment see the two publications in English (previous note), especially pages 86–87 (2009) and 70–73 (2011).

⁸ Successive sixteenth-century editions of Calvin's *Harmony* printed parallel passages side by side, allowing readers to make their own observations: for the relevant English parallels (including John's Gospel), using the New International Version, readers might consult Orville E. Daniel, *A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), paragraphs 169–87; or for a contemporary online synopsis of the passages in question, in Greek and English, see, for example <http://www.textexcavation.com/synopticitemizedinventory.html#resurrection>.

⁹ The entire *Harmony* follows Matthew's sequence. Calvin comments on Mark or Luke only when he regards their material as deviating sufficiently from Matthew's to require separate treatment.

¹⁰ As all citation of the Gospel text is italicized by Morrison and Parker, I have followed the same practice when reproducing it here.

testimony” to Christ’s majesty over against “the disgrace of shame and contempt” characterizing the scandal of the cross.¹¹ The eclipsed sun powerfully tells hardened and blinded scribes and others that by crucifying Christ they have “shut out the light”; there is a lesson for readers: “the sacrifice by which we were redeemed was of no less importance than if the sun fell out of heaven.”¹² Christ’s cry (Matt 27:46) gives voice to his dread as he contemplates carrying “our guilt in soul as in body” and standing “trial at God’s tribunal” for us.¹³ Calvin depicts Christ, harrowed by his Father’s absence, as fighting in faith and the power of the Spirit for a “confidence in the close assistance of God”; when, with his second cry (Matt 27:50), he can at last commit his spirit into his Father’s hands (Luke 23:46), we see how Christ trusts still in God as “the faithful Guardian of his soul,” adapting Psalm 31:9 for the horror of the “many deaths” that he must now die and for “the emergency of the moment.”¹⁴ Calvin sees only *Christ for others* here, keeping “all the souls of his faithful in one bundle,”¹⁵ along with his own, and entrusting himself and them to his Father: readers take note, Calvin says, and emulate his confidence. In the opened tombs (Matt 27:52–53) Calvin sees God’s demonstration that his Son “had entered death’s prison ... to lead all free who were there held captive”;¹⁶ *their* resurrection relies on Christ’s own, as firstborn and firstfruits (cf. 1 Cor 15:20; Col 1:18), as they sample the resurrection life that the whole church will one day enjoy. What became of these individuals afterwards? Calvin recognizes the exegetical challenge: with no “easy or ready solution”¹⁷ at hand, he assumes that these risen ones retained their resurrection life.

Calvin now synchronizes all three accounts. Whereas Mark has the soldier say “let be” (Mark 15:36), Matthew has others utter this (Matthew 27:49); these tally, for whoever started the mockery, everyone took it up “passing the jingle along the line.”¹⁸ When Luke combines torn veil and eclipse as being prior to Jesus’s death, inverting their order, for Calvin this illustrates the evangelists’ regular unconcern for any exact sequence in time; thus Matthew’s earthquake and split rocks are simultaneous events.¹⁹ In Mark 15:39 Calvin comments on a variant, likely influenced by Matthew

¹¹ *Harmony*, 206.

¹² *Harmony*, 206–7.

¹³ *Harmony*, 208.

¹⁴ *Harmony*, 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Harmony*, 211.

¹⁷ *Harmony*, 212.

¹⁸ *Harmony*, 209.

¹⁹ *Harmony*, 211.

27:50: the centurion—seeing not just how Christ died but also, *cried out*—was impressed by his “persistent endurance in calling on God’s name,” as well as by the accompanying “miracles in heaven.”²⁰ Luke’s version of the centurion’s response (*surely this was a righteous man*, Luke 23:47) has, for Calvin, “the same force”²¹ as what Matthew or Mark say: in all three, the centurion’s prominent recognition of Christ as Son of God contrasts starkly with the crass stupidity of the Jewish authorities, as God makes sure that testimonies to his Son do not go unnoticed. Interestingly, for Calvin the centurion is merely a “momentary herald of the Deity of Christ,” whose words are “a sudden and passing impulse,”²² while the crowds’ beating their breasts and going away (in Luke 24:48) represent “a public expiation ... for the unjust and wicked killing” that may or may not have produced “a better repentance”²³ subsequently.

For his concluding commentary on Jesus’s death, Calvin focuses on the women (Matt 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; and Luke 23:49). *As many women were there* (Matt 27:55), the texts simply warrant this; however, with gender equality still far distant, Calvin’s emphasis is nevertheless remarkable for 1555. The women are those “whom the Lord retained as witnesses”²⁴ in the absence of the male disciples. John perhaps stayed at the cross;²⁵ but where were the others? By deeming the women “worthy to be put before the men” some “serious criticism of the Apostles” by the evangelists is implied, linked to their absence: “It was a great disgrace,” he writes, “to withdraw from that scene, on which depended the salvation of the world.” By contrast, Calvin is impressed with the women: by their staying at the cross “their singular devotion to their master shone out the more clearly ... [and] they must have had a rare enthusiasm and fire in them.” He can still say condescendingly that “though we might not think there is so much authority in women, ... our faith ... rests on God, the true Author of their testimony!”²⁶ Even so, the female disciples remain crucial: sparing neither effort nor means to stick by Christ, they hang on his words to the bitter end and should be saluted as those on whom God prevailed “to be the witnesses of that story—without which faith we could not be saved.”²⁷

²⁰ *Harmony*, 213.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Harmony*, 214.

²⁴ *Ibid.* for all citations in this paragraph.

²⁵ Calvin admits, however, that the Synoptics are silent on this.

²⁶ *Harmony*, 214.

²⁷ *Harmony*, 215.

2. *Jesus's Burial* (Matt 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–44; and Luke 23:50–56)

For Calvin, here is testimony that Jesus “died a real death, on our account.” The nub is how “the curse which [God’s Son] had for a while undergone began to be lifted.”²⁸ Calvin sees providence at work in the intervention of Joseph, a noble and respected Jew who sought “to cover the shame of the cross with honourable burial” and took “very great risk” in so declaring his faith, thanks to “the hidden prompting of the Spirit”;²⁹ “God’s Son,” Calvin concludes, “was buried under divine persuasion by the hand of Joseph,”³⁰ who was “equal to the responsibility.”³¹ A lesson may be taken from Joseph: “God shapes our hearts to new passions,” for just as Joseph boldly did his crucified Lord proper honor, so in light of his resurrection we ought to show “the same flourishing zeal for his glory.”³² Both Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:51 spell out how Joseph *was looking for the Kingdom of God*—for Calvin “the highest commendation” he could be given, showing how he hoped in God’s promised redemption: the Reformer wonders how many in his own “unhappy generation ... in fact aspire to this hope, even in a moderate degree”;³³ to those who would profit from the grace of God, Calvin then offers Titus 2:11–13 as an incentive.

Noting how *Joseph took the body* (Matt 27:59), Calvin observes how the Synoptics (unlike John) say nothing about the unguents, merely narrating a decent burial in a linen shroud. Nevertheless, over and above Joseph’s actions Calvin detects God’s secret purpose in the “new and still unsullied tomb” given his Son: thus God “in his very tomb set out the newness of life.”³⁴ According to Matthew 27:61, *Mary Magdalene was there*: in both Matthew and Mark the women merely watch, while Luke’s addition of their intention to prepare spices and liniments speaks of “a better odour, which the Lord breathed into his dying,”³⁵ which will draw the women back to the tomb and to higher faith.

3. *The Next Day* (Matt 27:62–66)

This short narrative accounts for the placing of a guard at the tomb. For Calvin, Matthew’s main aim is to present “the incredible providence of

²⁸ *Harmony*, 216.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Harmony*, 217.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Harmony*, 218.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

God, in proving the resurrection of his Son.”³⁶ Seeking to “suppress faith in a resurrection,” the authorities ironically facilitate it by placing witnesses by the tomb; it is as if God had hired them, using their efforts “to publish the glory of Christ, for when they found the sepulchre empty, they were left no chance of lying in denial of it”:³⁷ by keeping the tomb sealed, the soldiers also gave unintended testimony to resurrection when the body was not forthcoming. Pilate’s assent to the placing of the guard (v. 25), meanwhile, will only reinforce the limits set on the religious authorities’ attempts to twist the evidence. Calvin dwells on the words of the chief priests and Pharisees (Matt 27:63): “They actually name him a *deceiver* whose divine power and glory had so recently been displayed, with so many miracles.”³⁸ This is satanically inspired blasphemy, “(as it were) spitting in the face of God”; from it we should learn, on the contrary, “reverent, sincere attention”³⁹ and, rather than let their blasphemy trouble us, notice “the end to which God turns it,” namely, “to vindicate his Son.”⁴⁰

4. *Jesus’s Resurrection (Matt 28:1–7; Mark 16:1–7; and Luke 24:1–8)*

Calvin right away underlines the theological importance of Matthew’s account and its parallels, as “the closing passage of our redemption [and] our reconciliation with God ... [where] our righteousness came to be won and our access to heaven laid open.”⁴¹ Turning once more to the women, he pinpoints the fundamental importance of their role. Even though the women belong to what Paul calls foolish and weak in the world (1 Cor 1:27)—we can almost see Calvin’s male readers smile—the lesson for all to learn is to “lay aside all pride, and submit to the testimony of the women,”⁴² as the apostles did: Christ “gave them the message of the Gospel for the Apostles, making them their teachers ... honouring them with exceptional distinction, taking the apostolic office from the men for the moment and committing it to them.”⁴³ Here Calvin detects what he calls “Christ’s wonderful goodness,” which “shines out in presenting himself alive to the women with grace and courtesy, when they wrongly sought him among the dead.”⁴⁴ The women’s reward for coming to the tomb permits a further lesson to be

³⁶ *Harmony*, 219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Harmony*, 219–20.

⁴⁰ *Harmony*, 220.

⁴¹ *Harmony*, 221.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Harmony*, 222.

drawn: even today, no-one will come to Christ by faith in vain. At this point, synoptic comparison also throws up a question: how many women were there? Comparing Matthew 28:1 (Mary Magdalene and the other Mary), Mark 16:1 (Salome), and Luke 24:5 (mentioning only *the women*) Calvin concludes that the evangelists are referencing a greater number by instancing a few.⁴⁵

The women elicit further exegetical remarks. In Mark 16:3, which expresses the women's doubt, Calvin detects a sign of their "complete perplexity" and "holy excitement"⁴⁶ at the removed stone, as recounted by all three evangelists.⁴⁷ The *great earthquake* of Matthew 28:2, appropriately accompanying the hugely significant victory of Christ over death "on which all our salvation depends," is a portent alerting the women "to a new and unexpected work of God."⁴⁸ In the onlookers' quaking (Matt 28:4–5), Calvin highlights "two kinds of terror which Matthew contrasts":⁴⁹ the women's, soon to be calmed, is set over against the soldiers' "fright ... as great as the women's [which] they received no healing to relieve ... [since] only to the women did the angel say, *fear not*."⁵⁰ Calvin also spots the additional rebuke to the women in Luke 24:5 about seeking *the living among the dead*: the angel, he says, is further tweaking the women's ear! And when the angel says *go quickly, and tell his disciples* (Matt 28:7), this confers on the women God's "extraordinary honour" of witnessing to the apostles that Christ is risen—while Peter still hid for fear and for shame—and represents "the reward for their patience"⁵¹ in attending the sepulcher. Their message was

⁴⁵ Well aware that John's Gospel is also parallel at this point, Calvin considers apparent discrepancies. While Matthew and Mark have one angel, John and Luke have two: for Calvin this is synecdoche (the part representing the whole), with Matthew and Mark content to focus on the one angel who spoke. When Matthew mentions that *an angel sat upon the stone*, this might be either a case of *hysteron-proteron* (making something later come earlier) or an evangelist's typical unconcern for the order of events. The angel's appearance is an outward sign of God's glory, adapted to our human weakness: visible, it should direct our minds to God who is invisible—as "a taste of his spiritual essence, that we should seek him in Spirit" (*Harmony*, 224). Finally, in the Synoptics' failure to recount the race to the tomb between Peter and the other disciple (as found in John 20:1–12), Calvin also sees "nothing unusual for them." *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Harmony*, 223.

⁴⁷ Concerning when things took place, Mark's end of the Sabbath and dawning of the first day of the week (Mark 16:1) are one and the same: all three evangelists agree. In regard to the spices, "Luke's narrative differs considerably from Mark's" (*Harmony*, 222–23) by clearly distinguishing the preparation from the Sabbath rest prior to the setting out; nevertheless, for Calvin the same sequence of events is implied.

⁴⁸ *Harmony*, 223.

⁴⁹ *Harmony*, 224.

⁵⁰ *Harmony*, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

nonetheless for Peter, whose “shameful lapse had need of special comfort ... however disgracefully and wickedly he had fallen.”⁵²

5. *The Women's Return* (Matt 28:8-10; Mark 16:8-11; and Luke 24:9-12)

The Synoptics are silent, unlike John, about Mary Magdalene's first return to the city, announcing the disappearance of the body, relating only the women's “second return”⁵³ as they rush to obey the angel's commission. Christ meeting them so they could see him for themselves is “a singular mark of kindness”⁵⁴ designed to remove the lingering doubt in their *fear and great joy* (Matt 28:8), help them fully digest the angel's words, and achieve the peace of mind that the Spirit brings: only by such a meeting could their trembling fear and flight (Mark 16:8) be overcome; with this interpretation Calvin anticipates his commentary on the longer ending (vv. 9–20), viewed as canonical in his day.⁵⁵

How is Christ's *don't hold on to me* (John 20:17), spoken to Mary, to be reconciled with the detail that the women *took hold of his feet* (Matt 28:9)? By Christ first allowing Mary to take assurance from touching him, then encouraging her to let go: in the fact that the women *worshiped him* Calvin also sees “a proof that their recognition was certain,”⁵⁶ while his command not to be afraid (Matt 28:10) bids the women—and us—“take courage, and dare to boast” in his resurrection.⁵⁷ By putting Peter's discovery at the tomb first, Luke 24:12 clearly reverses the narrative order, Calvin says, as confirmed by John's account; this alteration allows Luke “to underline the Apostles' hardness in scorning the women's words.”⁵⁸

6. *The Guards' Report* (Matt 28:11-15)

Central to Calvin's focus here is the “reward paid out for perjury”⁵⁹ to some or all of the soldiers by the priests who, in order to buy a lie, “were forced to bribe [them] with a large sum” and thus get further mired in their sin and guilt; as a result, *this saying was spread abroad* (Matt 28:15). Calvin

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Harmony*, 226.

⁵⁴ *Harmony*, 227.

⁵⁵ By regarding Mark 16:9–20 as Scripture, Calvin correspondingly fails to address various issues of interest to us: problems with the longer ending, the merits of any rival ending, the issue of a lost ending or a rationale for v. 8 being the original or intended Markan ending.

⁵⁶ *Harmony*, 227.

⁵⁷ *Harmony*, 228.

⁵⁸ *Harmony*, 229.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

sums up what God allows to happen here as “the final culmination of [his] vengeance in blinding the Jews” for willfully despising “their own Redeemer”: God might have prevented such a rumor from extinguishing “his Son’s glory”; instead we see him “loosing the reins on the wicked, that they may come out all the worse.”⁶⁰

7. Jesus’s Appearance on the Emmaus Road (Mark 16:12 and Luke 24:13–30)

Apart from a very brief reference in Mark 16:12, this story is unique to Luke. In partial explanation of differences between the evangelists, here as elsewhere Calvin detects the providential and guiding hand of a divine Author in their work: “the Spirit of God shared out the parts appropriately to each evangelist, so that what did not strike one or another may be learned from the rest.”⁶¹ At the same time, this incident has a special point: the Lord’s reproof of his apostles’ slowness to believe. Insofar as *they communed with each other* (v. 14), Calvin pictures the two companions wrestling over “the scandal of the cross”; their desire to overcome it “showed Christ a means of approach,”⁶² opening a door to him for the correction of their error. *Their eyes were holden* (v. 16) not because Christ’s bodily form had become unrecognizable but because the travelers’ own eyes were “checked”—as a reminder to us that “God keeps the use of [our faculties] in his hand”⁶³ and that, in our “wretched state of corruption,”⁶⁴ we only see anything clearly by “the wisdom of the Spirit.”⁶⁵ What Christ did for the two companions he must still do secretly for us today (v. 17): “he freely comes up to us and teaches us.”⁶⁶

In light of Cleopas’s expressed hope (v. 21), Calvin detects a “godly man, caught between faith and fear,”⁶⁷ who knows the testimony that the tomb is empty and Christ risen but still struggles to overcome his fear. Calvin underscores the reprimand (v. 25), which shows how Christ might as well have spoken previously to “trees and stones,” so dull were his disciples at recalling his prediction of resurrection or grasping how the words of the prophets supported this. By contrast the walk (v. 26) brings them Jesus’s “generous explanation”⁶⁸ of how Messiah must suffer and die to expiate the world’s

⁶⁰ *Harmony*, 230.

⁶¹ *Harmony*, 231.

⁶² *Harmony*, 232.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Harmony*, 233.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Harmony*, 234.

⁶⁸ *Harmony*, 235.

sin, removing the curse and clearing “the pollution of others by guilt imputed to himself”: Christ’s death is “the chief part of the redemption.”⁶⁹ This explanation, *beginning from Moses* (v. 27), “borrows from the Law and the Prophets the proof of his teaching,” because these preliminaries are needed for understanding the Gospel. Since Luke gives no detail of relevant Scriptures, Calvin supplies none but concentrates on defending the general fact that “Christ is rightly inferred from the Law, if we think how the covenant which God struck with the Fathers depended on a Mediator.”⁷⁰

In his exposition of v. 28 Calvin deals with an old allegation: in making as if to go farther, does Christ engage in a pretense? If so, it is no greater than posing as a traveler in the first place; rather, suspense is maintained “till the time for his revelation was ripe,”⁷¹ when *he took the bread* (v. 30), doing that which his disciples recognize would “remind and arouse their thoughts.”⁷²

8. *Jesus’s Appearance in Jerusalem* (Mark 16:13–14 and Luke 24:31–40)

Previously God had obscured these disciples’ sight; now, “as far as was necessary for their witness to the resurrection, [Christ] let them see him” (Luke 24:31).⁷³ Their haste to share this news with the apostles in Jerusalem, for Calvin, “adds to the narrative.”⁷⁴ Mark 16:13 says that the eleven did not believe the two, whereas Luke 24:34 narrates a contrasting “reward of mutual confirmation.”⁷⁵ Calvin can explain the inconsistency: “the general statement includes a synecdoche,” for not all believe them and some still doubt—with “Thomas more stubborn than them all.”⁷⁶ Further differences between John’s and Luke’s accounts of Jesus’s next appearance, and Mark’s much briefer one, resist harmonization; but Calvin finds “no contradiction,”⁷⁷ unless one were to quibble over whether Jesus appeared after nightfall or late at night. As to whether the eleven were there (as Mark and Luke say), or Thomas was absent (as John declares), Calvin also sees no problem: eleven is “the number of the apostles”—even if one should be

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Harmony*, 236.

⁷¹ *Harmony*, 237. Calvin considers it unnecessary to resort to Augustine’s more sophisticated reasoning here, involving tropes and figures of speech.

⁷² *Ibid.* Here, too, Calvin takes Luke’s words more simply and literally than Augustine or others as real bread for eating—rather than a symbolic offering, as though the companions now saw Christ in what Calvin calls a “spiritual mirror.”

⁷³ *Harmony*, 238.

⁷⁴ *Harmony*, 239.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Harmony*, 240.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

missing—while John may still preserve details that the others omit or Luke alone may refer to the disciples’ dread (v. 37). Terrified and troubled (v. 38) as they are, seeing they do not see: so Jesus says *see my hands* (v. 39), proving thereby for Calvin that Christ has a real body that may be touched.⁷⁸ Christ’s stigmata, testifying to his resurrection for us, are for Calvin temporary “left-overs of the cross” that Christ bore for a time “for the sake of his people.”⁷⁹

9. *Jesus’s Final Words in Luke (Luke 24:41–49)*

Calvin begins with the apostles’ ongoing disbelief (v. 41), just as he will later highlight their failure to recollect both Jesus’s teaching and the supporting testimony of the Old Testament (v. 44). Interestingly, Calvin acknowledges (before dismissing) the kind of “curious questions” we might be tempted to formulate from the text’s silence: whether Christ digested the food, or what sort of nourishment his body got from it, “and what became of the excrement!”⁸⁰ For Calvin, the one who made all things could “reduce a morsel of food to nothing when it was his will”;⁸¹ what we should ponder here, instead, is Christ’s extraordinary condescension in taking food “to persuade the disciples of his resurrection.”⁸²

More decisive is the fact that Christ *opened their mind* (v. 45). The Reformer reads this as Christ beginning “to teach them inwardly, by his Spirit,” his outward teaching ministry having so far “made no headway”⁸³ with them. Calvin’s reader and the Reformed church may learn twin lessons: first, that the Spirit’s inner guidance must accompany Scripture for it to have any effect—for “the disciples did not have their minds opened to see God’s mysteries without assistance”; and second, that then as now the Spirit interprets only Scripture, not vain “revelations.”⁸⁴ Christ here was not merely “minister of the outward voice ... but reached into minds by his hidden power ... a sure proof of his Godhead.”⁸⁵ With the Spirit now at work in the apostles by Christ’s gift, he “gives a truly fruitful discourse on Scripture,”⁸⁶ in which *thus it is written* (v. 46) enshrines the principle of certain fulfillment,

⁷⁸ This fact, he says, rules out any “transubstantiation of the bread into body, the local presence of the body” at the Supper. *Harmony*, 242.

⁷⁹ To suppose that in his resurrection glory he *remained* marked by the scars would, for Calvin, be “foolish, old women’s nonsense.”

⁸⁰ *Harmony*, 244.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Harmony*, 243.

⁸³ *Harmony*, 245.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Harmony*, 246.

with everything directed towards the key point that “Christ is the end and soul of the law.”⁸⁷ In essence, for Calvin Christ here teaches us to seek “the cause and ground of our salvation” in his death and resurrection—and only there—as the unique source “of our reconciliation with God and regeneration into new and spiritual life.”⁸⁸

In announcing the preaching of repentance for forgiveness of sins to all nations (v. 47), Calvin sees Christ revealing “what he had concealed before, that the grace of redemption, brought by himself, is clearly for all nations, without distinction.”⁸⁹ Only following his resurrection is Messiah revealed as the Redeemer of all peoples: things begin in Jerusalem, for the Jews remain “in first rank” as having “the right of primogeniture”⁹⁰ (Jer 31:9), thus showing God’s covenant to be fruitful. Although the apostles *are witnesses* (v. 48), no “warrant to publish the Gospel” is given them as yet but merely a preparatory explanation about “new grace” to compensate for “their recent failure,” which incentivizes them for the forthcoming “mission of publishing eternal salvation to the whole world.”⁹¹ As though anticipating the apostles’ sense of inadequacy for this task, Christ reminds them of the Father’s promise of the Spirit (v. 49): “putting himself in the place of the Father, [he] undertakes to perform it, thereby claiming again for himself divine authority.”⁹² Calvin sees the command to stay in the city as “a useful test of their obedience”: although they now have the Spirit, and understand the Scriptures, before beginning to speak they must await Christ’s “good pleasure”⁹³ and a new endowment of power; the lesson for Calvin’s reader is that “we are taught by their example, not to attempt anything but at God’s call.”⁹⁴

10. *Jesus’s Farewell* (Matt 28:16–20 and Mark 16:15–18)

Matthew 28:16 tells only “how the eleven disciples were appointed to their office,”⁹⁵ concentrating on “what affected us most,”⁹⁶ namely, the entitlement of Christ in his universal authority (v. 18) to commission the apostles. Concerning the evangelists generally, with their differing accounts, Calvin can therefore repeat how “the Holy Spirit who directed their pen was content

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *Harmony*, 247.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *Harmony*, 248.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Harmony*, 249.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

to bring in the whole by their joint testimony.”⁹⁷ Following Matthew’s emphasis, Calvin concentrates on Christ’s “supreme and truly divine power of command”—a post-resurrection authority sufficient for promising eternal life for “the whole human race”⁹⁸—and on the apostles’ need to know that their Lord was fully in charge and thus well positioned for directing, and endowing them for, their difficult task. Accordingly, “the power [Christ] now took, when appointed Judge of the world,”⁹⁹ had him ascend to his Father “wearing the insignia of supreme king”: the apostles now knew that “their Champion sat in heaven, and that supreme power was given to him ... [to] rule over heaven and earth”;¹⁰⁰ this would be “more than enough ... aid for them, to overcome every obstacle.”¹⁰¹

Throughout his discussion of Matthew 28:19–20 (and Mark 16:16 in parallel) Calvin has in mind the apostolic task of faithfully transmitting what Christ commanded as “Master of his Church.”¹⁰² From the injunction to teach (Matthew) or to preach the gospel (Mark) or observe all that the Lord commands (Matthew), Calvin deduces the apostolate to be “a responsible office” and essentially a “responsibility to teach.”¹⁰³ Here some of Calvin’s exegesis becomes polemical: such a task ought not to be usurped by “fake men” who “live at ease as kings”;¹⁰⁴ he is thinking of the papacy he knew and in particular of what he perceives to be the papal court’s intolerable temerity in masquerading as “heralds of the Gospel”¹⁰⁵ while failing to preach it. Remarkably, Calvin can nonetheless countenance a contrasting scenario: “We would readily suffer [the pope] to be the successor of Peter or of Paul if only he did not lord it over souls as a tyrant. ... The teachers set over the Church ... must themselves depend solely on the mouth of one Teacher, so as to win disciples for Him and not for themselves.”¹⁰⁶

In the command to *make disciples of all nations* Calvin remarks how Christ “removes the distinction and equates Gentiles with Jews,” bidding his apostles “scatter the teaching of salvation throughout all the regions of the earth”¹⁰⁷ and so fulfill the prophecy of light to the Gentiles in Isaiah 49:6;

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *Harmony*, 250.

¹⁰⁰ *Harmony*, 249.

¹⁰¹ *Harmony*, 250.

¹⁰² *Harmony*, 255.

¹⁰³ *Harmony*, 250.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Calvin also concludes that “all sacrificers are degenerate, and lying, who are not engaged in the task of teaching.” *Harmony*, 251.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ *Harmony*, 255.

¹⁰⁷ *Harmony*, 251.

by *every creature* “Mark means the same.” How vital was this command is apparent to us, says Calvin, from the apostles’ later scruples: Gentiles might “pollute their doctrine” (Acts 10:28).

Doubtless encouraged by Mark 16:16’s evocation of both faith and salvation along with baptism, Calvin discusses the latter¹⁰⁸ with several distinct opponents in mind. First, “foolish men [who] devise various sacraments by their will,” without any “basis in the word”—still thinking of Rome, its “superstition” and “magical exorcisms.”¹⁰⁹ Second, “hypocrites”¹¹⁰ who see only the outward sign but miss the need for accompanying faith or the teaching of the gospel. And third, and at most length, the Anabaptist view that baptism is only rightly administered where “faith has preceded it.”¹¹¹ Whatever the bearing of these controversies upon Calvin’s situation, he does not let them guide his exegesis: the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles is the context for this evocation of baptism, and Calvin expounds baptism *into the name of the Father* (Matt 28:19) in light of that. Christ seals with baptism “a mission of eternal salvation to be carried to all Gentiles,” for whom “the faith of the Word”¹¹² must indeed come first as the means whereby they are gathered into God’s people. For Jew or Gentile alike confidence comes “from Christ, their head, [because] the Father showed himself in the Son, his living and express image [and the Son] by the brilliant light of his Spirit, shone out upon the world.”¹¹³

In relation to the phrase *these signs shall follow them that believe* (Mark 16:17), Calvin directs his attention to miracles. During his ministry Jesus confirmed by miracles “the faith of his Gospel”;¹¹⁴ now the risen Christ “extends the same power for the future”¹¹⁵ when, despite his absence, miracles may confirm his resurrection or ratify the gospel as his followers do the same or greater things in his name (John 14:12). For Calvin miracles were intended to “give enough assurance for the gospel teaching at its outset, [but] their use ceased not long after, or at least, instances of them were ...

¹⁰⁸ *Harmony*, 251–54.

¹⁰⁹ *Harmony*, 252.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* Calvin argues, essentially, that whereas “the faith of the Word” must indeed come first, as the means whereby *Gentiles* are gathered into God’s people, once gathered in—like Israel—they become *sons*, and the Father extends to “their sons and grandsons in the same way” the same covenant promise given to Abraham (Gen 17:7); he concludes, “I deny that baptism is unwisely conferred on infants; the Lord calls them to it, as he promises that he will be their God.” *Harmony*, 253.

¹¹² *Harmony*, 252.

¹¹³ *Harmony*, 253.

¹¹⁴ *Harmony*, 254.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

rare.”¹¹⁶ While for Calvin miracles apparently do not still happen in 1555, he nonetheless rejects as a slander the charge that “our doctrine is without miracles.”¹¹⁷ His main concern is spurious miracles—“empty fabrications,” “delusions,” and “impostures” that fool people: hadn’t Christ foretold (Matt 24:24) that “the kingdom of Antichrist would be full of lying signs?” Seeking for miracles, Calvin says, is a distraction from faith and the “proper proofs” on which faith relies; this emphasis may explain why the Reformer declines to say anything at all about picking up snakes or drinking deadly poison (Mark 16:18)!

11. *Jesus’s Ascension* (Mark 16:19–20 and Luke 24:50–53)

Where Matthew concentrates on Christ’s reign over the whole world, Mark mentions the ascension but, unlike Luke, not “the place and manner of it.”¹¹⁸ *By led out until they were over against Bethany* Mark also has Jesus ascend from the Mount of Olives, the very place where he had set out for the cross. Only a few witnessed either Christ’s resurrection or ascension: this was so that both events would be “known more by the preaching of the Gospel than by the eyes.”¹¹⁹ Luke’s *lifted up his hands and blessed* (Luke 24:50) attracts Calvin’s attention, for it makes the priests’ blessing by lifted hands (as practiced in ancient Israel) now properly Christ’s. Under the law priests had given blessing “in [God’s] name, as mediators,”¹²⁰ like Melchizedek to Abraham or the utterance *we bless you from the house of the Lord* (Ps 118:26). Thus Christ is “the true Melchizedek and eternal priest,”¹²¹ in whom we “are blessed by God the Father” (Eph 1:3).¹²² Seeing Christ bless the apostles publicly and solemnly in this way, Calvin concludes, is for all of us an invitation to go to him directly “for a share in the grace of God.”¹²³ Luke 24:52 notes how the apostles worship the ascending Christ—not merely, says Calvin, “as Teacher or as Prophet, not even as Messiah ... but as the King of glory, and revealed as Judge of the world.”¹²⁴ The apostles’ joy in continuing Temple worship (Luke 24:52–53) “is contrasted with their fear which previously kept them shut in, hidden, at home.” Luke’s brevity here is attributed by Calvin to the evangelist’s intention to develop his story

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *Harmony*, 255.

¹¹⁸ *Harmony*, 256.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² *Harmony*, 257.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid. for all citations in this paragraph.

further in Acts. The remaining detail about the ascension is Mark's: since Christ *sat down at the right hand of God* (Mark 16:19), "it is as if He were called God's Deputy, to act in his Person"; as the right hand is not about place, but power, Christ stands "guard over the world for the salvation of the godly."

Calvin's final paragraph in the *Harmony* focuses on the words *and they went forth and preached* (Mark 16:20). He interprets them as betokening a transformation in the disciples describable only as "really divine work,"¹²⁵ seen in Mark's addition *the Lord working with them*. Like the apostles, "ministers of the Word ... have no power but what he supplies,"¹²⁶ says Calvin: their work would be in vain but for "the secret effect of the Spirit." In Mark's additional detail *confirming the Word* Calvin sees the Lord's intervention "to prevent the preaching of the Gospel being vain" as well as an instruction on how to regard miracles properly: "they must serve the Gospel." This closing emphasis reflects Calvin's opening dedication, commending to the Frankfurt authorities his "study which interprets the riches of the Gospel."¹²⁷

Conclusion

Perhaps the reader may agree that these eleven expositions—or my summary of them, at least—do indeed explicate a single movement *from ignominy to glory*: from shame to honor, from humiliation to exaltation, and from Christ's scandalous rejection to his glorious vindication. Throughout, the digest has reflected Calvin's persistent accentuation of the dimension *Christ for us and in us*: he constantly reminds his reader of the particular reasons why Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension provide grounds for assurance—though not without due acknowledgement of the believer's frailty or susceptibility, like Cleopas (Luke 24:21), to be "caught between faith and fear."¹²⁸ There is no exegesis without application, and Calvin constantly invites us to respond with faith, hope, and love to the Christ whom he shows us.

It has also emerged how Calvin's gospel-within-the-Gospels rests firmly on a consensus: the common witness of the three evangelists, as painstakingly established in the *Harmony*. The strength of this threefold cord is especially apparent whenever Calvin defends the evangelists' unanimity

¹²⁵ *Harmony*, 258.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* for all citations in this paragraph but the final one.

¹²⁷ *Harmony*, Dedicatory Epistle, ix.

¹²⁸ *Harmony*, 234.

against allegations of contradiction. However, in systematically favoring that which Matthew, Mark, or Luke say *with one accord*, Calvin is listening for the divine Author's orchestration. Why, then, is he correspondingly less attentive to each evangelist's *particular* insights—even though he faithfully expounds this differentiated material, taking it to possess the same divine inspiration as the shared content? Calvin, it seems, does not hear in these unique perspectives anything fundamentally determinative of the gospel *according to* Matthew, Mark, or Luke specifically.

In and for his own day, Calvin labored to demonstrate the unity of these three interconnected Gospels, and the quality of his work has emerged in the digest above. For today's context, the challenge may lie in keeping this unity in balance with the Gospels' diversity: at stake is the recognition that the one Jesus has engendered three distinct, if linked, Gospel portrayals.¹²⁹ There is a multifaceted, three-dimensional complexity to Jesus that no one Gospel captures but all three presuppose, and part of this resides in the singular beauty and grandeur of each evangelist's irreducible and irreplaceable witness to Jesus.

In today's academy, and whatever the solution to the Synoptic problem, Christian scholars may gainfully draw inspiration from Calvin's committed exegesis by offering carefully delineated accounts of Mark's Jesus, or Matthew's, or Luke's, as wholly preferable and historically more believable alternatives to the colorless cardboard cut-outs that have often resulted from the harmonizing undertaken by much historical Jesus research.

In the church, patient hearing of each Gospel's distinctive testimony, told separately and in a sustained way, should serve to oust any confused amalgam or consumer-friendly, customized Jesus from the imagination, mind, and heart of ministers and believers, inspiring and shaping worship, discipleship, evangelism, and mission with each evangelist's authentic portrayal: as the Spirit, working with the Word, mediates the Christ of the Gospels' manifold and variegated witness, to the Father's glory, wouldn't Calvin approve?

¹²⁹ Not forgetting John's Gospel (not our concern here) or, indeed, other New Testament witnesses to Jesus.