

From Exegesis to Preaching: Calvin's Understanding and Use of Ephesians 2:8-10

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Abstract

This essay discusses the history and development of John Calvin's use of Ephesians 2:8-10. It traces Calvin's use of this text through the various editions of the *Institutes*, his 1548 commentary on Ephesians, and his sermon on this text, and it explores how Calvin used the text and how he employed the passage in the different theological and pastoral contexts throughout his life. It showcases the nexus between exegesis, theology, and pastoral ministry during his life.

Introduction

As famous as John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are, he never was a one-book man. In the past, historians and theologians have focused almost exclusively upon Calvin's *Institutes* and paid little attention to his commentaries.¹ Yet in the preface to his *Institutes*, Calvin departed from some of

¹ For criticisms of this trend, see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4-8. Despite Muller's trenchant critique of the flawed one-book methodology, some scholars still persist in

the common practices of his day. Unlike Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), who included doctrinal excursions in their commentaries, Calvin placed his doctrinal arguments in the *Institutes* and left his exegesis in his commentaries.² To get a fuller picture of his views, one needs to read the *Institutes* and Calvin’s commentaries in tandem. But Calvin was more than an exegete and theologian; he was also a pastor and preacher.³ Any exploration of Calvin’s theology, therefore, should take the *Institutes*, his commentaries, and his preaching into account. A broader examination of these three different contexts paints a clearer picture of Calvin’s exegesis and theology in action.

Hence, this essay traces Calvin’s exegesis, theology, and preaching on Ephesians 2:8–10, “For by grace you have been saved by faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”⁴ How does Calvin understand this text? What doctrinal teaching does he draw from it? How does he employ and explain it in his preaching? In one sense, we can obtain answers to these questions by tracing the homiletical process: exegesis leads to doctrine, which informs preaching. The historical reality, however, is that Calvin did not proceed in this manner. Rather, Calvin’s first comments on Ephesians 2:8–10 appear in the second edition of the *Institutes*. Hence, rather than impose an artificial process upon Calvin’s understanding and work, we will trace his use and explanation of this text through time. Along the way we will seek to place his exegesis in its historical context, which provides indicators as to why and how he explains the text. The essay explores Calvin’s use of Ephesians 2:8–10 through the 1539 and 1541 revisions of the *Institutes*, his 1548 commentary on Ephesians, his 1558 sermons on Ephesians, and the final 1559 revision of the *Institutes*. I then offer some analysis regarding Calvin’s use of this Pauline text.

employing this method (so Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008], 4).

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), preface (pp. 18–19).

³ For overviews of Calvin’s labors as a pastor and preacher, see, e.g., Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim’s Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 110–45; T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (1975; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 116–23; idem, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 57–192; Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 288–308.

⁴ English Standard Version—all other Scripture quotations are drawn from Calvin’s works.

I. *The 1539 Institutes*

The *Institutes* were born as an apologetic for the burgeoning Protestant Reformation, but the first edition is a shadow of the definitive 1559 edition. Shortly after its initial publication, Calvin began revising the *Institutes*. According to the editorial spadework of Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel, editors of the *Opera Selecta* edition of the *Institutes*, the first time Calvin makes reference to Ephesians 2:8–10 is in the 1539 edition, not in the initial 1536 edition.⁵ There are four references to the text in his 1539 revision.⁶ The first reference appears in Calvin's explanation of the priority of grace to human works in book II, when he interacts with patristic teaching, primarily Augustine (354–430) and his refutation of Pelagius (354–420). Calvin draws readers into redemptive history and the shift between the ages by arguing that in redemption, our "common nature is abolished" because we enter the new creation. He argues that there is an implied contrast between Adam and Christ when Paul teaches that "we are the workmanship of God, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."⁷ Calvin quotes Ephesians 2:10 to prove the utterly free nature of redemption:

Now, if we possessed any ability, though ever so small, we should also have some portion of merit. But to annihilate all our pretensions, he argues that we have merited nothing, because "we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained"; in which expressions he again signifies that all the parts of good works, even from the first inclination of the mind, are entirely from God.⁸

In this context Calvin's appeal is to a broad concept, namely, the priority of grace to human effort in salvation.

The second reference appears in book III and a new section devoted to the explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith. Here Calvin's comments become more specific—he narrows the field of discussion to "the whole controversy concerning righteousness."⁹ In other words, over against the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Reformers argued that

⁵ Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 384.

⁶ I refer to Barth and Niesel's textual markers as they appear in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.6. I take all subsequent quotations from earlier editions of the *Institutes* from the Allen translation of the 1559 edition.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.6.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.13.2.

justification was by faith alone and that human works played no role in the acquisition of righteousness.¹⁰ At this stage of the Reformation, the pope had not yet convened the Council of Trent, so disputes over the doctrine of justification were restricted to the works of individual theologians. Nevertheless, Calvin addresses the controversy and collates Ephesians 2:8–9 with Romans 3:26:

According to the apostle’s testimony, he has bestowed his grace on us in order “to declare his righteousness; that he might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” [Rom. 3:26]. Wherefore, in another place, after having declared that the Lord has conferred salvation on us in order to display “the praise of the glory of his grace” [Eph. 1:6], repeating, as it were, the same sentiment, he adds, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast” [Eph. 2:8–9].¹¹

The overall intent of Calvin’s citation here is that Ephesians 2:8–9 corroborates the claim that in justification people do not contribute “the least particle of righteousness,” because it would detract and diminish “from the glory of the righteousness of God.”¹² Note: though the text mentions nothing specific about the doctrine of justification and righteousness, Calvin believes the text addresses the subject under the broader rubric of the gratuity and priority of God’s grace.

In a third reference Calvin appeals to the text to demonstrate the similar point that “we attain to the hope of salvation, not by works, but solely by the grace of God.”¹³ Calvin’s point is to prove the inability of fallen human beings to somehow merit salvation. He utterly rejects the idea that fallen humanity’s works factor in justification: “For, according to the constitution of our nature, oil might be extracted from a stone sooner than we could perform a good work.”¹⁴

Calvin employs the fourth and final reference to the text in his refutation of the specific Roman teaching that people are justified by faith working through love. Calvin refers to the classic medieval distinction between *fides informata* (unformed faith—faith without works) and *fides formata* (formed faith—faith with works).¹⁵ According to his understanding of the Roman

¹⁰ For an overview of Reformation views on justification, see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 208–307.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.13.2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.14.5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948), I IIae q. 113 art. 4, and q. 114 arts. 3, 4, 8.

position, “faith renders good works effectual to justification.”¹⁶ Calvin identifies this view with the theologians of the Sorbonne and aligns it with the earlier teaching of Peter Lombard (ca. 1096–1164). Despite the fact that the theologians of the Sorbonne frequently cited and appealed to Augustine, Calvin believes they did not understand his teaching. In line with Lombard and Aquinas, the theologians at the Sorbonne believed that people could perform good works if grounded in God’s grace.¹⁷ Once again Calvin parries the claim with reference to the text: “Nothing good, then, can proceed from us but as we are regenerated, and our regeneration is, without exception, entirely of God, we have no right to arrogate to ourselves the smallest particle of good works.”¹⁸

In all four quotations Calvin uses the text to reject any and all claims that good works contribute to a person’s salvation, and he specifically cites the text three times in his locus on justification to this end. To cite Ephesians 2:8–10 in support of the doctrine of justification was a common trend among sixteenth-century Reformed theologians. Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), for example, cited the text to argue that believers are justified solely by the grace of God through faith and that Paul merely summarized arguments ultimately drawn from his letters to the Galatians and Romans.¹⁹ Other theologians such as Lancelot Ridley (d. 1576) and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) offer similar arguments and link Ephesians 2:8–10 with justification.²⁰ Others, such as Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), make broader observations about the priority of divine grace to human activity but do not invoke the doctrine of justification.²¹ These slightly different interpretations are not contradictory but complimentary. Those who enlist the text to support the doctrine of justification merely get into the specific doctrines that Paul sets forth in the general terms of grace and salvation by faith.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.15.7.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I IIae 113 art. 3; Peter Lombard, *Sentences: Book II*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: PIMS, 2008), II.xxvi–xviii.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.15.7.

¹⁹ Heinrich Bullinger, *In omnes apostolicas epistolas, divi videlicet Pauli XIII. et VII. canonicas, commentarii* (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1539), 416.

²⁰ Lancelot Ridley, *A Commentary in Englyshe upon Sayncte paules Epystle to the Ephesyans for the Instruccyon of Them That Be Unlearned in Tonges* (London: Robert Redeman, 1540), comm. Eph 2:8–10 (no pagination in this edition); Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification*, The Peter Martyr Library 8, trans. and ed. Frank A. James III (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 2003), 109.

²¹ Wolfgang Musculus, *In epistolas Apostoli Pauli, ad Galatas & Ephesios, commentarii* (Basel: ex Officina Hergaviana, 1561), 48–53.

II. *The 1543 Institutes*

In his 1543 revision of the *Institutes*, Calvin added another reference to the text in his locus on justification. Perhaps because of negative feedback about his criticisms of the theologians of the Sorbonne, Calvin sought to clarify his remarks. He identifies the key point of controversy: there is never any action performed by the godly that could pass muster at the divine bar. “This,” writes Calvin, “is the principal hinge on which our controversy . . . turns.”²²

Calvin explains that there is no dispute on the “beginning of justification,” at least with the “sounder schoolmen.” Calvin does not identify who he has in mind with this statement.²³ He agrees that when God delivers a sinner from condemnation he receives righteousness, namely, the forgiveness of sins. But Calvin then states and rejects the common Roman formulation by which they subsume sanctification under justification, “and so they describe the righteousness of a regenerate man as consisting in this—that a man, after having been once reconciled to God through faith in Christ, is accounted righteous with God on account of his good works, the merit of which is the cause of his acceptance.”²⁴ To counter this claim, Calvin lines up several passages of Scripture, including Romans 4:9, “faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness,” Habakkuk 2:4, “the just shall live by his faith,” and Romans 4:7, “blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven.” The last text he quotes is Ephesians 2:8–9. The overall point is that “Paul does not tell the Ephesians that they are indebted to grace merely for the beginning of their salvation,” but throughout the entirety of it.²⁵ In other words, at no point in justification do the believer’s good works factor in. Calvin places Ephesians 2 in the same orbit of texts as those that deal with justification.

III. *The 1548 Ephesians Commentary*

Calvin’s full-scale reflection upon Ephesians, and specifically 2:8–10, appears in his 1548 commentary on Ephesians, which was part of a larger work devoted to four of Paul’s epistles, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians.²⁶ At this point there is no indication that Calvin had preached

²² Calvin, *Institutes* 3.14.11.

²³ Ibid. A likely candidate might be Aquinas. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), §§ 92–100 (pp. 224–26).

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.14.11.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: Expanded Edition*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 78.

on Ephesians, as his sermon series on the book would not begin until 1558. This means that Calvin was engaged in writing his commentary as a project in its own right, rather than as preparation for immediate preaching on the epistle. In his opening comments on the text, Calvin notes how in the preceding statements (Eph 2:1–7) Paul touches upon the subjects of election, free calling, and salvation by faith alone.²⁷ In line with the references to the text in his 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin highlights the gratuity of salvation and priority of God's grace: "Here is nothing of our own."²⁸ True to his stated intentions in the *Institutes*, Calvin only obliquely mentions some of the related doctrinal issues: "Ought we not then to be silent about free-will, and good intentions, and invented preparations, and merits, and satisfactions?" Once again, Calvin emphatically accents the priority and exclusive place of divine grace in salvation: "Faith, then, brings a man empty to God, that he may be filled with the blessings of Christ."²⁹

Unlike his comments in the *Institutes*, Calvin makes exegetical remarks about the nature of Paul's statements. Calvin contends that with the three phrases "not of yourselves," "not of works," and "it is the gift of God," Paul "embraces the substance of his long argument in the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, that righteousness comes to us from the mercy of God alone, is offered to us in Christ and by the Gospel, and is received by faith alone, without the merit of works."³⁰ But even though Calvin was committed to leaving doctrinal exposition to his *Institutes*, this did not mean he ignored polemics. Calvin rejects the Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage, which claims that when Paul precludes works, he only intends to eliminate ceremonial works; in other words, Paul precludes ceremonial works of the law from our salvation, not good works in general. Aware of this, Calvin insists that Paul does not deal with one type of works but eliminates all moral effort.³¹

Calvin also refutes the Roman Catholic attempt to distinguish between initial and final justification, though he does not specifically invoke these terms. Roman Catholic interpreters, according to Calvin, readily admit that Paul bathes all of redemption in divine grace but hold that the specific exclusion of works applies only to the "first grace." Moreover, though they try to apply Paul's words merely to faith, that is, contending that man's faith

²⁷ John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 144 (on Eph 2:8). Hereafter cited as *Ephesians*.

²⁸ Calvin, *Ephesians*, 144 (on Eph 2:8).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 144–45 (on Eph 2:9).

owes its origins entirely to God’s grace, Calvin counters that faith and salvation find their origin and completion in divine grace.³² These subjects were likely in the forefront of Calvin’s thought, given that the Council of Trent had recently published its decree on justification, and Calvin had issued a response in the previous year (1547).³³

Calvin goes on to comment on Ephesians 2:10. He believes that works do play a role in salvation, but not in justification. Hence, he believes that Paul excludes human works from salvation—they are not causes of salvation, but rather effects:

By setting aside the contrary, he proves what he says, that we are saved by grace, that no works are of use to us in meriting salvation, for all the good works which we possess are the fruit of regeneration. Hence it follows that works themselves are a part of grace.³⁴

As with his earlier comments in the 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin argues that Paul’s ultimate reference here is to Christ and the new creation. Because people have been regenerated and renewed in Christ, which stands in contrast to their creation in Adam, they produce the fruit of good works.³⁵ On these grounds Calvin rejects any and all claims that good works are a material cause of salvation.

To close the door on any attempt to wrest Paul’s famous text from the apostle’s meaning and intention, Calvin describes its erroneous exegesis:

We are justified by faith, because faith, by which we receive the grace of God, is the commencement of righteousness; be we become righteous by regeneration, because, being renewed by the Spirit of Christ, we walk in good works. Thus they make faith the door by which we enter into righteousness, but imagine that we attain it by works; or, at least, they define righteousness as uprightness, when a man is reformed to a good life. I do not care how old this error may be; but they err who support it by this text.³⁶

Calvin does engage in theological exposition, but it turns closely upon questions of erroneous exegesis and suspect theological conclusions. He sees such an interpretation as having a twin foundation, one partially in

³² Ibid., 145 (on Eph 2:9).

³³ Cf. *Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent*, “Decree on Justification,” sess. 6, January 13, 1547, in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:826–39; John Calvin, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote (1547)*, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 7 vols., ed. Henry Beveridge (1851; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 3:17–188.

³⁴ Calvin, *Ephesians*, 145 (on Eph 2:10).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 146 (on Eph 2:10).

God's grace and the other in human effort. According to "Paul's design," the apostle uses these statements to box out completely any and all human contributions. The "cause of righteousness" lies completely with God and not at all with man.³⁷

Calvin places an exclamation point on his argument by drawing attention to Paul's final words, "which God afore prepared." Believers can lay no claim upon God, because salvation is entirely of him: "God owes us nothing." Hence, we have no place whatsoever for boasting. Even believers' good works "were drawn out of His treasures, in which they had long before been laid up; for whom He called, them He justifies and regenerates."³⁸ He closes his comments with what appears to be an allusion to Romans 8:30 and Paul's famous golden chain of salvation. This fits within his broader observation that Ephesians 2:8–10 encompasses Paul's arguments from Romans and Galatians. In this case, even though Paul does not mention effectual calling, justification, or sanctification, Calvin believes they are nevertheless in view. He recurses to these doctrines in his exegesis because Ephesians 2:8–10 is the tip of Paul's doctrinal iceberg—the other doctrines lie just beneath the surface.

IV. *The 1558 Sermons on Ephesians*

As one might expect, Calvin's sermon on Ephesians 2:8–10 takes on a slightly different flavor than his commentary or the dispersed references throughout the editions of his *Institutes*. In his *Institutes* he appeals to portions of the text to make specific points, and in his commentary he offers observations on all of the ideas contained in the verses. His sermon looks more like his commentary because he offers a *lectio continua* exposition of the text. The sermon does not have a formal structure per se, but is rather a series of observations and comments that loosely follow verses 8–10. If there is a structure to his sermon, we might identify three main sections loosely based around (1) the gift of God; (2) the new creation; and (3) good works.

1. *The Gift of God*

In the first section Calvin explores what Paul means when he designates salvation as a gift from God. He repeatedly informs his congregation that they contribute nothing to their salvation and that everything comes from God. Given the divine source of salvation, a regular theme is the believer's

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 147 (on Eph 2:10).

need for humility and gratitude. In fact, unlike what he does in his commentary and *Institutes*, Calvin raises the dangers of pride and the need for humility at least eleven times throughout this sermon.³⁹ Given that the context is congregational, rather than academic (*Institutes*) or exegetical (commentary), he naturally focuses his energy upon the needs of his congregation—their struggle with pride. He wants his congregation to recognize that God is the source of all their goodness and hence their salvation: “So then, if a man intends to find any good in himself, he must not seek it in his own nature, nor in his former birth, for there is nothing but corruption, but God must reform us before we can have a single drop of goodness in us.”⁴⁰

But though Calvin addresses issues of moral conduct, this does not mean he ignores doctrinal disputes. He tells his church that fallen man cannot offer virtue, wisdom, ability, or righteousness in the cause of his salvation. At this point he specifically mentions his target:

For the papists are driven to confess that without God’s help they can do nothing, and that they are too weak to withstand Satan, if they are not strengthened by the Holy Spirit. They will readily acknowledge that they cannot deserve anything at all, but that God must supply their deficiencies; also that they have need of the forgiveness of sins.⁴¹

This statement echoes his earlier sentiments in the 1539 revisions to his *Institutes* that he had no quarrel with the “sounder schoolmen” who acknowledged the necessity of grace for the initiation of salvation.⁴² But he continues,

But yet, for all that, they cannot bear to give up their freewill, but truly imagine that they can assist themselves in part. Upon this they are always building up some merit, and although they grant that God’s grace goes before them at first, yet they always mix with it some effort and good will of their own, and when they flee to God for release from their sins, they bring him such and such satisfactions.⁴³

He does not mention condign or congruent merit, or initial and final justification, or penance, but he nevertheless engages the substance of Roman claims and sets them before his congregation.

³⁹ John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians* (1562; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 155, 157–58, 160, 163, 167–68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes* 3.14.11.

⁴³ Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 158–59.

Calvin invokes one of the slogans of the Reformation in response: “We must bring nothing with us but faith alone.”⁴⁴ He also sets two biblical illustrations before his church to buttress his point. The first is Mary’s song (Luke 1:53), “in which it is said that such as are so filled with pride shall remain hungry, and God will laugh their vain presumption to scorn.” The second is the words of the psalmist (Ps 81:10): “We cannot, then, be fed with God’s grace unless we long for it, and feel our own need, according to the saying of the psalm, Open thy mouth and I will fill it.”⁴⁵ The implication is that papists, the arrogant, and hypocrites attempt to contribute their own works towards their salvation, whereas the humble and contrite rely completely on God’s grace and do so by faith alone.

2. *The New Creation*

In the sermon’s second section Calvin comments upon Paul’s statement that believers are God’s workmanship, and he expounds on the concept of the new creation, a theme he included in his 1539 revision of the *Institutes*.⁴⁶ Calvin wanted the congregation to know that when Paul wrote about God’s workmanship, he did not refer to the initial creation. In fact, given their fallen condition, people are “unfit for the heavenly life ... because they are but as dead creatures and as carcasses in which is nothing but rotteness.”⁴⁷ Calvin likely employs the imagery of a rotten carcass, which does not appear in his *Institutes* or commentary, because he was preaching to common people—those familiar with animal husbandry and agricultural life. In other words, they would likely have encountered an animal carcass at some point, hence the blunt but nevertheless relevant illustration.

Calvin contrasts sinners’ fallen existence “in Adam” with being “created in Jesus Christ,” whom Calvin identifies as the “second Adam.”⁴⁸ He contrasts the “general creation by which we live in this world” with God’s grace by which he “creates us new again when he vouchsafes to give us newness of life by his gospel.”⁴⁹ Calvin fills in this two-Adam structure by elaborating humanity’s fallen condition. Infants fall under God’s just condemnation. No one can claim that during the years of discretion (seven to twenty or thirty years old) they had some measure of goodness; on the contrary, everyone’s thoughts and desires are utterly rebellious against God. From

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.6.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Sermon on Ephesians*, 160.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 160–62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

birth people only fight against God because they are all under Adam's curse.⁵⁰ The only remedy for Adam's curse is re-creation in Jesus, the second Adam:

For here he shows that the creating of us in Adam is but a bringing of us to destruction, and therefore we must be fashioned and created anew again, namely, even in Jesus Christ who is the second Adam, as he himself calls him in the fifth chapter to the Romans and in the fifteenth chapter of the first Letter to the Corinthians.⁵¹

Calvin establishes the redemptive-historical structure of the old and new creation, which has the first and second Adams as their respective founts. But in accordance with the first portion of his sermon, he reiterates that only God's grace bridges the two realms. Calvin once again criticizes the papists, who claim they possess heavenly life "partly by God's grace (they say) and partly by our own freewill."⁵² Calvin informs his congregation of the dangers of the papist alchemy, the attempt to mix God's grace with human works to create the gold of salvation. Such efforts only reveal pride and their villainous blasphemy. "What can a dead man do? And surely we are dead," writes Calvin, "until God quickens us again by means of faith and by the working of his Holy Spirit."⁵³

To prove the incompatibility of Adamic and new creation life, Calvin raises two concepts: creation *ex nihilo* and union with Christ. Calvin argues that fallen sinners cannot somehow contribute to their salvation because it is ultimately a divine act of creation, "We are created is as much as to say that we were nothing at all before." Just as God called forth Abraham, who was "altogether decrepit and barren," and Sarah, who was past childbearing years, God brought forth life through the gift of faith. Only when people acknowledge their utter inability can they lay hold of salvation through the gift of God's grace through faith.⁵⁴ Union with Christ is ultimately the source of all of the new creation blessings: righteousness, wisdom, virtue, and goodness: "God does not pour them out haphazardly here and there, but has put the fullness of all things belonging to our salvation into Jesus Christ, so that when we are once members of his body, we are also made partakers of all his benefits."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., 161–62.

⁵¹ Ibid., 162.

⁵² Ibid., 163.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 165.

3. *Good works*

In the third and final section of his sermon, Calvin reflects upon Paul's statement that God has prepared good works for those who are in Christ. Once again Calvin raises concerns about the papists. Both the Roman and Reformed churches expressed interest and concern for good works, but they differed on where, precisely, they should appear in the doctrine of salvation. Calvin employs several illustrations to make his point:

Have you coined them [good works] in your own shop, or have you some garden planted by yourself from which to gather them, or do they spring, I do not know how, from your own labors and skill, so that you may advance yourselves by them?⁵⁶

Calvin sweeps away papist claims with these two illustrations (the coin and garden) and further emphasizes his point with a third example. How can people complain against God when he has taken sinners into his home, given them money, and then sinners use this same money to repay the host? How can sinners boast that they have somehow paid the host?⁵⁷

Through his sovereign work of the Spirit, God reforms the lives of sinners, which enables them to harmonize their lives with his law.⁵⁸ The only way, then, that believers can produce good works is if they flee to God for refuge, and when they have done good, to shun pride and cling steadfastly to God, who is the source of all righteousness. "Whenever God gives us good works," writes Calvin, "although they are the fruits of his goodness alone, yet they cannot purchase anything for us at his hand, for we must always establish and settle ourselves upon the forgiveness of our sins. There lies all our righteousness."⁵⁹ Good works, therefore, are the fruit of salvation and are neither the means by which we purchase God's favor nor something in which we place our trust.⁶⁰

V. *The 1559 Institutes*

Calvin's last two references to Ephesians 2:8–10 appear in the definitive edition of the *Institutes*. What makes these comments interesting is the historical context in which they were added. Calvin likely added these comments while in the midst of preaching through Ephesians or shortly thereafter. His sermon series, his earlier commentary, and twenty years of ministry lie

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 165–66.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

behind his 1559 revisions. The first addition is found in book III and Calvin's treatment of repentance. Calvin may have included this revision in the wake of the tumultuous conflicts with the Libertines in Geneva. In 1555 the Libertines instigated a riot in an effort to disrupt the city; they failed, and many either fled Geneva or were arrested.⁶¹ In fact, Calvin and the company of pastors had sought to win the right for the church to handle discipline rather than the local magistrates. In the wake of the Libertine-instigated riot, the church won this right and made immediate use of it. In 1556 there were 80 cases of discipline, and in 1557 there were 160 cases. During 1558 there were on average 240 discipline cases per year, and in 1559 there were 300 excommunications.⁶² Calvin, therefore, likely inserted a reference to Ephesians to explain the nature of repentance given the increased pastoral engagement with church discipline.

In the broader context of his arguments, Calvin explains in what manner repentance is the prior condition of the forgiveness of sins.⁶³ He explains that repentance immediately follows faith and is the fruit of it, arguing against the claim that repentance precedes faith.⁶⁴ He brings many arguments against this claim and then invokes Ephesians 2:10 to prove that even repentance is the gift of God: "In the whole course of regeneration we are justly styled God's 'workmanship, created unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.'"⁶⁵ Once again he enlists this text to protect the prerogative of divine grace over human activity.

In the second reference Calvin cites Ephesians 2:10 against claims that the doctrine of election encourages antinomianism. At this point in his ministry he had engaged in a large-scale debate on the doctrine of election with Jerome Bolsec (d. ca. 1584) from 1551 through 1555.⁶⁶ A common objection raised against Calvin's doctrine of election was that he rendered good works superfluous. Calvin believed that such accusations were malicious and impudent. He notes that the same accusations were leveled against Augustine. Undaunted by criticism, Calvin points to Paul, who wrote about predestination "openly and loudly" and also exhorted the recipients of

⁶¹ Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 208–9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 215–16.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.3.1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.3.21.

⁶⁶ Cf. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Cambridge: James Clark, 1961), 89, 107; Philip C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551–1555: The Statements of Jerome Bolsec, and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Other Reformed Theologians* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1993); Richard A. Muller, review of *The Bolsec Controversy* by Philip C. Holtrop, *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 581–89.

his letters to live godly lives. To this end he quotes Paul: "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them."⁶⁷ Echoing sentiments expressed in his sermon on Ephesians 2:8–10, Calvin writes, "When we exhort and preach, persons endued with ears readily obey; and those who are destitute of them exhibit an accomplishment of the Scripture, that hearing they hear not."⁶⁸ In other words, those whom God has chosen will heed the exhortation to good works, which means that predestination does not incite lawlessness in the church.

VI. Analysis

The development of Calvin's use of Ephesians 2:8–10 begins with silence in the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*. He sees no need to reference the passage even though he references Ephesians 2:1–6, 11, 12, 18, 20, and 21 among his numerous scriptural citations.⁶⁹ In the revision of his *Institutes* in 1539, where the locus on justification is introduced, he makes four references to the passage to prove the gratuity of salvation, the exclusion of human works, and the divine origins of righteousness, and to reject the Roman Catholic view of faith working through love. He also employs the text a fifth time in his 1543 revision of the *Institutes* to buttress his doctrine of justification. In his 1548 commentary on Ephesians, Calvin focuses upon exegetical issues that were likely fostered by the Council of Trent's recent declaration on justification and his own response. In his commentary Calvin once again employs the passage in his explanation of elements of the doctrine of justification.

By 1558 and 1559 Calvin was preaching through Ephesians and making final revisions to his *Institutes*. His sermon reflects his earlier comments and use of the text, particularly on the gratuity of salvation, the theme of new creation, and the place of good works in salvation. Calvin is not averse to naming his papist foes, but he arguably expends greater effort in addressing his congregation's pride. He does draw his church's gaze upon justification and union with Christ in his sermon, but he focuses upon the broader issue of God's grace and the need for humility. Given the recent tumult in Geneva with the 1555 Libertine riot and the recent transfer of discipline from the magistrate to the church, these events explain the shift in Calvin's attention.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.13.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 384.

The unfolding history of Calvin's use of Ephesians 2:8–10 suggests that early in his career he sought to articulate and defend the doctrine of justification. But later in his ministry he believed he needed to address matters related to sanctification. He never surrendered justification but nevertheless emphasized humility and gratitude in his preaching and inserted two extra comments about repentance and the necessity of good works. With the Libertines pressing against him on one side and the predestinarian controversy with Bolsec on the other, Calvin wanted to assure his congregation and the readers of the *Institutes* that repentance and good works were necessary and important parts, but not causes, of justification or salvation.

This brief history raises the question of what comes first, the chicken or the egg? Do the circumstances of life make or reveal character? In this case, does Calvin's ministry shape or reveal his understanding of Ephesians 2:8–10? The answer is yes. In this case it appears that Calvin affirmed both halves of Paul's famous passage: the utter gratuity of salvation and the necessity of God-ordained works. He never wavered on either of these issues but saw the need to press them into service in different ways at different points in his ministry.

Conclusion

Despite the prominence and long shadow of Calvin's *Institutes*, the famous Genevan Reformer is far from a one-book man. Calvin is a dense, dark forest, and the path through his works has many twists and turns. Challenges face historians because of his voluminous and multifaceted labors—his *Institutes* are but one facet of his theological *oeuvre*. To obtain a full picture, one must explore his commentaries and sermons and must do so with an eye to the events in Calvin's life. When and why did he write? Moreover, far from the straight line from exegesis through doctrine to preaching, Calvin's development is more complex. He undoubtedly exegeted Scripture when he wrote and revised his *Institutes*, but sometimes his more concentrated exegesis came after his theological formulations. Moreover, he used Ephesians 2:8–10 in different ways depending on the context. He always makes the same general point regarding the gratuity of salvation, but in his *Institutes* he stresses the doctrine of justification, in his commentary he refutes Roman Catholic exegetical claims about the nature of Paul's exclusion of works, and in his sermon he hammers on the theme of humility and gratitude.

This brief survey only scratches the surface of the relationship between exegesis, theology, and preaching. How does Ephesians 2:8–10 feature in Calvin's letters and other doctrinal treatises? Does he make reference to

Ephesians 2:8–10 in other sermons during his ministry? Answering such questions would undoubtedly create a thicker account of his use of Paul's famous text, but they will have to wait for another day. For the time being, this essay demonstrates the need for a holistic investigation of Calvin's theology. One-book examinations of his theology should be set aside, as they create a thin account, one at odds with his own stated purposes. His *Institutes* was intended as an introductory textbook for theology students. Certainly his other works and ministerial labors help us to have a better understanding of his theology. If anything, a full-orbed investigation of Calvin must involve his *Institutes*, his commentaries, and his sermons so we can better grasp him as exegete, theologian, and pastor.