

*TRADITIO AND PARADOSIS VS. HUMANAS  
TRADITIONES:*  
CALVIN ON THE PROBLEM OF TRADITION

by Richard A. Muller

**Abstract:** Contrary to some recent claims made concerning the Reformers' highly negative approach to tradition, to the point of casting it aside in favor of an individualistic biblicism, examination of Calvin's arguments reveals a clear distinction between the traditions carrying forward the biblical message and purely "human traditions." Whereas Calvin was consistently negative concerning the latter, his positive view of the former sense of tradition enabled him to reference the works of the church fathers in defense of the Reformation.

I. Calvin on Tradition and Scripture: a State of the Question

The topic of tradition and its relation to the interpretation of Scripture in the Reformation remains a matter of significant debate—as is clear from Brad Gregory's claims concerning the role of the Reformation in his genealogical history of modern secularism.<sup>1</sup> Gregory draws on the approach of earlier genealogical histories by claiming a point in the past as the source of perceived modern problems and then writing a highly selective narrative in support of the claim.<sup>2</sup> To identify the origins of Reformation protest, as he does, in some aspect of purportedly decadent later medieval theology is, to say the least, old hat—a new version of a failed argument. With reference to the particular issue of tradition, despite the seeming density of his citations, Gregory's approach amounts to an exercise in cherry picking rooted in the highly biased accounts of the Reformation found in earlier works of Roman Catholic

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1. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

2. Cf. the devastating review by Glen A. Moots, "Was the Protestant Reformation a Revolution?" at <<https://lawliberty.org/was-the-protestant-reformation-a-radical-revolution/>>, i.e., *Law & Liberty* (October 29, 2021).

writers,<sup>3</sup> and on a rather wooden, restrictive reading of *sola Scriptura* and on an insistence on interpreting the Reformers' polemics against traditions as *de facto* rejections of even the relative doctrinal importance of what had been taught in earlier centuries—this despite the Reformers' appeals to the church fathers and the ancient councils. Gregory's work draws on a tradition of Roman Catholic polemics and, on the Protestant side, echoes a sadly inadequate reading of *sola Scriptura* as *nuda Scriptura*.

In response to these readings of *sola Scriptura*, several studies have demonstrated both the nineteenth-century origin of the term and its inapplicability, when utterly restrictively defined, to the thought of the Reformers, according to whom traditions had a place in the formulation of doctrine and the regulation of the life of the church.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have placed the Reformation-era Protestant understanding of biblical interpretation and doctrinal formation squarely in the line of what Heiko Oberman identified as "Tradition I," a view of tradition not as a second source of religious and theological truth but as "the history of obedient interpretation."<sup>5</sup>

Still, despite the importance of the relationship between the doctrinal tradition of the church and the biblical norm of theology to an understanding of the Reformation, and to Calvin's thought in particular, surprising little has been written to detail Calvin's understanding of tradition, whether in relation to Calvin's understanding of traditions or with a view to the relationship between his thought and Oberman's argument concerning tradition.<sup>6</sup> The older study by Réveillaud recognized that Calvin's negatives were largely reserved for "human traditions," and elaborated at length on Calvin's use of the fathers, noting in its conclusion the "abyss" separating Protestantism from the Roman Catholic claim that the rule of faith is constituted by

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3. Notably George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); Yves M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions. An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1967), originally published as *La Tradition et les Traditions* (Paris: Fayard, 1960–1963).

4. See A. N. S. Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright, eds., *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–327; and Henk van den Belt, "Sola Scriptura: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture," in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 51/2 (2016), 204–226. Also note Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001).

5. Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 54; cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 52–54; Mathison, *Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 72–74; Van den Belt, "Sola Scriptura," 205, 209–210.

6. But note Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), 103–120.

Scripture and tradition as interpreted by the church's *magisterium*.<sup>7</sup> More recently, one author has argued that Calvin offered no "extended treatment of the notion of tradition" only to add the problematic conclusion that Calvin tended "to reject the category of tradition in its entirety" largely for polemical reasons.<sup>8</sup> Calvin's critical and frequently negative stance has been registered in a study of his Old Testament exegesis that also identifies his assumptions concerning the decline of the church after the first five centuries.<sup>9</sup> Another writer accepts the conclusion that Calvin's comments on tradition were typically negative, but counters the point by looking to Calvin's use of the church fathers, and concludes "that whatever Calvin *said* about the tradition, his own *use* of tradition at times accepted its normative power"—without, however, examining what Calvin actually meant when he referenced "tradition."<sup>10</sup> Several essays—notably by Roman Catholics—have simply identified Calvin's view of tradition as utterly negative, typically with reference to his use of the term *humanas traditiones* or *traditiones hominum*,<sup>11</sup> as if these terms summarized the entirety of Calvin's thought on the subject.

An alternative line of scholarship has identified Calvin's positive reception of traditionary materials. His views on the relative support given to the Reform by referencing the early fathers and councils, notably in his *Reply to Sadoletto*, have been examined.<sup>12</sup> Other studies have studied Calvin's use of the church fathers in

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7. Michel Réveillaud, "L'Autorité de la tradition chez Calvin," in *Revue réformée*, 9/2 (1958), 25–45, here pp. 26, 28–30.

8. Eric Dean, "The Relation between Scripture and Tradition; Theoretical Statements by Calvin and Barth," in *Encounter*, 23 (1962), 277–291, here pp. 277, 279–280.

9. Jon Balsarak, "The Authority of Scripture and Tradition in Calvin's Lectures on the Prophets," in *The Search for Authority in Reformation Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 29–48.

10. R. Ward Holder, "Calvin and Tradition: Tracing Expansion, Locating Development, Suggesting Authority," in *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 25/2 (2009), 215–226, here pp. 216–217, 222; and note the similar approach in idem, "Of Councils, Traditions, and Scripture: John Calvin's Antidote to the Council of Trent," in Herman Seldehuis and Arnold Huijen, ed., *Calvinus Pastor Ecclesiae: Papers of the Eleventh International Congress on Calvin Research* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 305–317; and idem, "The Reformers and Tradition: Seeing the Roots of the Problem," in *Religions*, 8/6 (2017), 1–11.

11. E.g., André Avideno, "Two Reformers and Tradition," in *At-One-Ment: Studies in Christian Unity*, 8 (1966), 53–60, here pp. 58–59; Yves M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions. An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 141. Note also George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 98–110.

12. Cf. Réveillaud, "L'Autorité de la tradition chez Calvin," pp. 28, 30; David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and Calvin on Church and Tradition," in *Luther in Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 85–97.

some depth,<sup>13</sup> and still others have looked to his use of patristic materials in exegesis.<sup>14</sup> With the partial exception of Réveillaud's study, however, these essays have not examined in detail what Calvin says about the terms *traditio* and *traditiones*, not to mention his fairly extensive exegesis of the terms *paradosis* and *paradidomi* in the New Testament. Accordingly, much of the extant scholarship also fails to identify the fairly clear (and biblically-grounded) distinction made by Calvin and other Reformers between the legitimate *paradosis* and what they identified as "human traditions."<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I propose both to fill a gap in the scholarship by examining Calvin's views on tradition in greater exegetical depth and to argue in connection with Calvin's other works that he not only did not "reject the category of tradition in its entirety," but also that the exclusively negative claims of Gregory and others concerning Calvin's views on tradition lack genuine foundation.

## II. Scripture and Traditions in Calvin's Early Works, 1536–1539

Calvin's concerns over the problem of the claim of normative traditions in the church span the entire course of his career, from his earliest publications to the final edition of his *Institutes*. His earliest references to the problem of traditions are found in the 1536 *Institutes* and the 1538 *Catechismus*. In the former document, he rails specifically against ecclesial rules concerning contracting marriage and abstaining from food, and against regulations imposed by councils. These are "traditions" that cannot be traced back to the apostles: the rulings of the apostles did not impose

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13. A. N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Use of the Fathers and the Medievals," in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 16 (1981), 149–205; idem, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and Johannes van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," in Irena Backus, ed., *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), vol. 2, 661–700.

14. R. Ward Holder, "Calvin's Hermeneutic and Tradition: An Augustinian Reception of Romans 7," in *Reformation Readings in Romans* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 98–121; and Jon Balsarak, "The Authority of Scripture and Tradition in Calvin's Lectures on the Prophets," in *The Search for Authority in Reformation Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 29–48.

15. Thus, e.g., Rodney Moss, "Beyond 'Two Source Theory' and 'Sola Scriptura': Ecumenical Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition," in *Acta Theologica*, 35/2 (2015), 66–81, here pp. 67, 71–72, 78–79. Moss would have profited from a reading of Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 54–60, 69, where it is clearly shown that by the time of the Reformation the issue of Scripture and tradition had already passed well "beyond" a simple dichotomy between a "two source" theory and a rigid notion of *sola Scriptura*. Note also Richard A. Muller, "Not of Private Interpretation: Scripture and Tradition in Reformation and Early Modern Protestantism," in *Christian Studies*, 31 (2019), 29–43.

burdens on conscience or “contaminate” worship with human inventions.<sup>16</sup> The 1538 catechism is even clearer on the issue:

civil observances, by ... order and decorum are kept in the assembly of Christians, are by no means to be classed among human traditions [*humanas traditiones*], but are rather to be referred to that rule of the Apostle, provided they are not believed to be necessary for salvation, or to bind consciences by religion, or are related to the worship of God, or lodge piety in these things. But we are stoutly to resist those regulations which under the title of “spiritual laws” are in force to bind consciences as if necessary for the worship of God.<sup>17</sup>

The referent in both cases is quite specific: Calvin did not here attack either tradition in general or all particular traditions belonging to the categories of teachings and practices, nor did he attack either the ongoing churchly exposition of Scripture or the teaching found in sound theological treatises concerning the doctrines of the faith.

As stated explicitly in the 1537 *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church*, Calvin held that there was a place for church ordinances that would assure the genuine preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments without binding the conscience as necessary to salvation: these were not the target of his polemic against human traditions.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Calvin insisted that subscription to the confession and catechism of the Genevan church should be required, on the assumption that conscience may be bound when there is a “conjunction” of confession of the faith with Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Such a confession must not be “stitched” together “superstitiously,” but composed of “words that have their meaning constrained by the truth of Scripture and that as much as possible are free

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16. John Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio, totam fere pietatis summam, et quicquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium, complectens: omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus, ac recens editum* (Basel: Platter & Lasius, 1536), iv (449); in translation, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), trans. and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 198.

17. John Calvin, *Catechismus, sive christianae religionis institutio, communibus renatae nuper in Evangelio Genevensis Ecclesiae suffragiis recepta* (Basel: Robertus Winter, 1538), xxxi (48); see the reproduction with facing English translation, *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans., with an intro. by Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972), 48.

18. Cf. John Calvin, *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva*, in J. K. S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 48.

19. Calvin, *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church*, 54; cf. John L. Thompson, “Confessions, Conscience, and Coercion in the Early Calvin,” in Brian C. Brewer and David M. Whitford, eds., *Calvin and the Early Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 155–179, here pp. 162, 163.

from the harshness that might offend godly ears or attach something to God that is unworthy of his majesty.”<sup>20</sup> As Thompson points out, Calvin’s attack on superstition evidences two directions—against the excessive use of biblical terms, presumably without proper explanation; and against the use of non-biblical terms that did not relate directly to the sense of the text.<sup>21</sup> A public confession or catechism should be, in Calvin’s words, a “catholic testimony [*catholica potius testificatio*]” to the faith of the church.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin’s positive understanding of tradition is quite clearly stated in his *Reply* to Sadoletto, penned in 1539, barely a year after the publication of his Latin catechism.<sup>23</sup> Sadoletto appealed to the Genevans to return to the “common faith” of the church, inasmuch as the “Church has regenerated us to God in Christ, has nourished and confirmed us, instructed us what to think, what to believe, wherein to place our hope, and also taught us by what way we must tend toward heaven.”<sup>24</sup> He went on to rest his argument on a version of the Vincentian Canon, posing a choice for the Genevans to follow “what the Catholic Church throughout the whole world, now for more than fifteen hundred years ... approves with general consent; or innovations introduced within these twenty-five years, by crafty or, as they think themselves, acute men; but men certainly who are not themselves the Catholic Church.”<sup>25</sup> The Catholic Church “has always and everywhere been directed by the one Spirit of Christ” and is, therefore, a body “in which ... no dissension can exist; for all its parts are connected with each other, and breathe together.”<sup>26</sup>

Calvin did not dispute the catholicity of Christian faith. He denied Sadoletto’s charge that the Reformers intended to lead people away from the forms of belief and worship that “the Catholic Church always observed.”<sup>27</sup> As he had done in the Lausanne disputation of 1536,<sup>28</sup> Calvin made the point that the doctrine of transubstantiation was a novelty “not only repugnant to Scripture but also contrary to

20. John Calvin, *Confessio Genevensis Praedicatorum*, as cited in Thompson, “Confessions, Conscience, and Coercion in the Early Calvin,” 165.

21. Thompson, “Confessions, Conscience, and Coercion in the Early Calvin,” 167.

22. John Calvin, *Catechismus, sive christianae religionis institutio*, iii.

23. John Calvin, *Ioannes Calvinus Iacobo Sadoletto Cardinali, Salutem*, in *CO* 5, col. 385–416, hereinafter, *Responsio*; in translation, *Calvin’s Reply to Sadoletto*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), I, 25–68; hereinafter, *Reply*.

24. Jacopo Sadoletto, *Epistola ad Senatam Populumque Genevensem*, in *CO* 5, col. 369–384, here col. 375, hereinafter, *Epistola*; in translation, *Sadolet’s Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva*, in Calvin, *Selected Works*, I, 3–22, here p. 10; hereinafter, *Sadolet’s Letter*.

25. Sadoletto, *Epistola*, in *CO* 5, col. 378; *Sadolet’s Letter*, 14.

26. Sadoletto, *Epistola*, in *CO* 5, col. 378; *Sadolet’s Letter*, 14.

27. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 392; *Reply*, 35.

28. John Calvin, *Two Discourses on the Articles*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans., intro. and notes by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 40–42, 45–46.

the consensus of the ancient church,”<sup>29</sup> in other words, contrary to both Scripture and the doctrinal or interpretive tradition.

Sadoletto’s definition of the church as one throughout all ages and directed by the Spirit, Calvin countered, omitted reference to the Word, which provides the church with its clarity and stability. Lacking reference to the Word of God and its authority, Sadoletto created a false choice between following the “authority of the Church” and following the “inventors of new dogmas,” as if the Reformers had altered the ancient faith and practice.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to Sadoletto’s allegations, the Reformers had not departed from teachings held by the church uniformly for fifteen hundred years—rather they had “to renew that ancient form of the Church, which, at first deformed and rendered foul by ignorant, lesser men, was afterward flagitiously mangled and almost destroyed by the Roman Pontiff and his faction.”<sup>31</sup> In direct contrast to the claim that the magisterial Reformers succumbed to an Anabaptist-like assumption of individualized, Spirit-led reading of Scripture, Calvin argued a rather different parallel, namely, between the Pope and the Anabaptists, given that both alleged the guidance of the Spirit in claiming as normative revelation their own pronouncements of doctrine.<sup>32</sup>

In somewhat less polemical terms, Calvin’s point was that the Reformation served a conservative purpose, did not intend to invent new doctrines, and did not depart from the ancient tradition of the church. Nor did the Reformation deny the capacity of the church to alter its practices and ceremonies to suit the needs of the time—the Reformation sought only to remove practices and ceremonies grounded in superstition and dangerous to piety,<sup>33</sup> what Calvin had elsewhere specifically identified as “human traditions.” And if the church discipline and ceremonies instituted by the Reformers were not identical to that of the early church, the church discipline and ceremonies of the Roman Church were tantamount to an abolition of the early church’s order. Calvin turns to Colossians 2:8 and refers to the “vain philosophy” of which the Apostle warns as the “sophistry” of scholastic theology.<sup>34</sup>

29. Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis, in libris quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus novum haberi possit* (Geneva: Robertus Stephanus, 1559), IV.xvii.14: “non solum repugnante scriptura, sed etiam veteris ecclesiae consensu.” I have consulted *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845); and *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), emending the translations as necessary. Cf. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 400; *Reply*, 46.

30. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 393; *Reply*, 36–37.

31. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 394; *Reply*, 37.

32. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 393; *Reply*, 36; cf. the allegations in Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 88, 91–92, 94–98.

33. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 395; *Reply*, 39.

34. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 396; *Reply*, 41.

Significantly, this is one of the texts in the New Testament that identifies “traditions of men” or “human traditions” as dangerous to the faith. Calvin certainly recognized the necessity of orthodox, churchly interpretation and explanation—as is clear from his earliest statements concerning trinitarian language: “Say consubstantial, and you will tear off [Arius’] mask, but you will add nothing to the Scriptures.... Say that there is a trinity of persons in the one essence of God: and your will say in one phrase what Scripture declares.”<sup>35</sup>

Calvin’s positive view of the tradition of biblical interpretation and theological formulation follows on the medieval understanding that Heiko Oberman identified as Tradition I, according to which tradition “was seen as the instrumental vehicle of Scripture which brings the contents of Holy Scripture to light in a constant dialogue between the doctors of Scripture and the Church.”<sup>36</sup> The Tradition I understanding recognized a distinction between Scripture and tradition but assumed that there was no doctrinal or dogmatic separation—as Oberman made the point, Scripture is not contrasted with tradition, and tradition is understood as “obedient interpretation” and is not reified as a norm standing independent of Scripture.<sup>37</sup> Such separation would occur when the interpretation departed from the legitimate sense of the text or when a doctrinal formulation rested on a foundation or purported foundation standing in contrast to Scripture. Even this sense of regulative authority of Scripture over both episcopal pronouncements and the interpretations of Christian commentators can be found in medieval sources known to Calvin and respected as enunciating normative opinions on the relative authority of Scripture and tradition—including Gratian’s *Decretum*.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin accordingly understood the authority of judgment in the church as derived from the constancy of faith, grounded in the spiritual apprehension of God’s truth in Scripture:

So true it is that Christian faith must not be founded on human testimony, not propped up by doubtful opinion, not reclined on human authority, but

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35. John Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio, totam fere pietatis summam, et quicquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium, complectens: omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus, ac recens editum* (Basel: Platter & Lasius, 1536), ii (116): “Dic consubstantiale, detraxeris versipelli larvan, & tamen nihil addis scripturis. ... Dic in una Dei essentia personarum esse trinitatem: dixeris uno verbo quod scripturae loquuntur.”

36. Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 54–55.

37. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 54.

38. Gratian, *The Treatise on Laws (Decretum DD. 1–20) with the Ordinary Gloss*, trans. Augustine Thompson and Katherine Christensen (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 29, 31–32. On Calvin’s knowledge of Gratian, see Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 44, 48, et passim; also Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 170–173.



engraven on our hearts by the finger of the living God. ... Hence arises that power of judging which we attribute to the Church, and wish to preserve unimpaired. For how much soever the world may fluctuate and jar with contending opinions, the faithful soul is never so destitute as not to have a straight course to salvation.<sup>39</sup>

Immediately following this affirmation of the relative power of the church to render judgments concerning “human testimony,” Calvin responds to the accusation, made in his time by Sadoletto and other Roman opponents and repeated in modern works like those of Congar, Tavard, and Gregory, that he and other Reformers have made subjective opinion the norm of Christian teaching:

I do not, however, dream of a clarity of faith that never errs in discriminating between truth and falsehood, is never deceived; nor do I assign to myself an arrogance which looks down as from a height on the whole human race, waits for no man’s judgment, and makes no distinction between learned and unlearned.<sup>40</sup>

The whole issue, Calvin argues, is to remove subjective human opinion from normative status in matters concerning salvation and to “insist on the work of the Lord ... which is so clear and certain, that it cannot be overthrown either by men or angels.”<sup>41</sup> Once this standard is recognized and respected for what it genuinely implies, it is utterly false to accuse advocates of reform as lacking respect for any human representatives of the church. “For although we hold that the Word of God alone lies beyond the sphere of our judgment, and that Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they accord with the rule of the Word,” Calvin adds, “we still give to Councils and Fathers such rank and honor as is proper for them to hold, under Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

### III. Tradition Defined in Scripture: Calvin’s Exegetical Foundation

*1. Tradition as positive deliverance of teachings.* As Geoffrey Bromiley observed of Thomas Cranmer,<sup>43</sup> Calvin wrote much about “traditions” but seldom used the term in the singular apart from his exegetical works, and definitely not in the sense that “tradition” is used in post-Tridentine Roman Catholic theology or in modern

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39. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 405; *Reply*, 53.

40. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 405–406; *Reply*, 53–54.

41. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 406; *Reply*, 54.

42. Calvin, *Responsio*, in *CO* 5, col. 416; *Reply*, 66.

43. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Tradition and Traditions in Thomas Cranmer,” in *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 59/4 (1990), 467–478.

ecumenical discussion as the ongoing churchly claim of normativity in doctrine and practice.<sup>44</sup> The focus of Calvin's theological usage of *traditio* and *traditiones* was on particular teachings, rules, practices, and ceremonies of the church, their sources, the question of their relative authority for faith and life, and the problem of what could, on the basis of Scripture, be identified as illegitimate traditions.<sup>45</sup> This datum in itself goes a long way toward explaining why Calvin offered no extended treatment, no *locus* on *traditio*, despite his attention to biblical texts referencing *paradosis* and his frequent complaints against "human traditions."

Calvin's positive view of tradition and traditions may be said to begin with Scripture itself, specifically with the practice of carrying forward truths concerning God and God's work in order to deliver them to succeeding generations—the *paradosis* noted specifically in the apostolic preaching of the New Testament. He recognized the presence of traditions underlying the written text of Scripture. Although he taught a form of verbal inspiration, Calvin did not assume that the historical and natural knowledge of the biblical writers was bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit in the process of inspiration. By way of example, in the "argument" to his commentary on Genesis, Calvin indicates that Moses' knowledge of the creation of the world did not rest on the direct divine bestowal of information; rather, Moses "described [what] was already known through the ancient and perpetual tradition of the patriarchs."<sup>46</sup> The knowledge that "all the evils of the present life" and "whatever is disorderly in the world" derived from the first sin has also been "delivered [*traditum*] by the hands of the patriarchs."<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, when God spoke to Isaac, "I am the God of Abraham," it "renewed the memory" of God's promises as they had been "transmitted" by Abraham to his

44. Arguably, the notion of "tradition" in the singular as "a dynamic process of transmission under the guidance of the holy Spirit" rather than as "traditions" in the plural concerned with particular teachings and practices was foreign to the early modern era, found neither in the Reformers nor in the Tridentine theology: see Avery Dulles, "Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition," in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 21/2 (1997), 5–19, here p. 17.

45. In the following essay, unless otherwise noted, Calvin's works are cited from *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863-1900), hereinafter *CO*; the commentaries are translated in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 46 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1851), hereinafter *CTS*, followed by the name of the biblical book, e.g., *CTS Romans*.

46. John Calvin, *Commentarii in quinque libros Mosis, Argumentum*, in *CO* 23, col. 7–8: "neque dubium nobis esse debet quin mundi creatio, ut hic describitur, ex veteri ac perpetua patrum traditione iam nota esset"; cf. *CTS Genesis*, I, 58.

47. Calvin, *Commentarii in quinque libros Mosis*, Gen. 3:19, in *CO* 23, col. 76; similarly, *ibid.*, Gen. 14:18, in *CO* 23, col. 202; on this issue, cf. Randall C. Zachman, "Oracles, Visions, and Oral Tradition: Calvin on the Foundation of Scripture," in *Interpretation*, 63/2 (2009), pp. 117–129.

posterity.<sup>48</sup> The reference in Psalm 105:18 to Joseph’s feet being fettered, a detail absent from the narrative of Joseph’s imprisonment, leads Calvin to comment on Genesis 39:20, that this information, absent from the Genesis narrative, was a matter of tradition—it as “delivered [*traditum*] by the hands of the patriarchs” to later generations.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Calvin recognized, in his comment on Acts 20:34–35, that there were words of Jesus that were not written down in the four Gospels but were remembered and handed down in the apostolic preaching.<sup>50</sup> Although referenced by Roman Catholic contemporaries as evidence of oral tradition,<sup>51</sup> none of these instances stands outside of the canonical scripture—and none of them refer to rules or observances that are fundamental to belief or binding on the conscience.

Calvin’s own usages of *traditio* were also biblically grounded, resting on the positive and negative uses of the Greek noun *παράδοσις* (*paradosis*) and the corresponding verb *παραδίδωμι* (*paradidomi*). First, the positive. Calvin’s positive sense of tradition looked to such texts as 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “stand firm, and hold the traditions which you have been taught”; 1 Corinthians 11:23, “for I received from the Lord what I also delivered [*παρεδίδοτε*] to you”; and 1 Corinthians 15:3, “for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” In Calvin’s view, Scripture provides two positive senses of *paradoxeis* or *traditiones*—first as deliverances of sound doctrine and second as rules of practice and discipline. The first of these senses of the term is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word, or by our epistle.” Calvin comments on the retention or maintenance of the form of the church in its basic instructions, as originally given by Christ and the apostles. He notes the presence of the plural, *παρὰδοσεις*, in 2:15 and argues that in this place, it should be rendered as *institutiones*, “teachings.” In this generalized sense, the term “is suitably applied to the ordinances that are appointed by the churches, with a view to the promotion of peace and the maintenance of order,” a sense that includes what Calvin identified as human traditions, without moreover any immediate negative connotation.<sup>52</sup> In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Calvin argues, the general term is not used as a reference to church order:

The context ... requires that it be taken here to mean the whole of that doctrine in which they had been instructed. For the issue set forth is most

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48. Calvin, *Commentarii in quinque libros Mosis*, Gen. 26:24, in CO 23, col. 365 (CTS *Genesis*, II, 70).

49. Calvin, *Commentarii in quinque libros Mosis*, Gen. 39:20 in CO 23, col. 508 (CTS *Genesis*, II, 302).

50. Calvin, *Commentarius in Acta Apostolorum*, in CO 48, col. 474 (CTS *Acts*, vol. 2, 264).

51. Note Michael O’Connor, *Cajetan’s Biblical Commentaries: Motive and Method* (Leiden Brill, 2017), 209.

52. Calvin, *Ad Thessalonicenses II*, 2:15, in CO 52, col. 207 (CTS 2 *Thess.*, 345).

important—that their faith may remain secure in the midst of a dreadful agitation of the church.<sup>53</sup>

Paul’s call to the Thessalonian congregation to “stand firm” implies more than the external governance of the church and does not offer any support to the “Papists” who use the text to justify their invention of traditions. The “everlasting consolation” and comfort that Paul announces rests on the teachings or doctrines that he has delivered to believers: “they have ground on which they may stand firm, provided they persevere in sound doctrine, according as they had been instructed by him.”<sup>54</sup>

The second sense of the term identified by Calvin refers to specific rites, ceremonies, and ordinances in the church, as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 11:2, “I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.” Here, Calvin comments, Paul began to consider the issue of “decorum ... in sacred assemblies.”<sup>55</sup> The text is important, because it can highlight the distinction between the Pauline meaning of *paradoxeis* and the “Papist” claim that apostolic teaching was delivered “partly in writings, partly in traditions [*partim scriptis, partim traditionibus*].”<sup>56</sup> The phrasing is significant. It already appears in the first edition of Calvin’s commentary on 1 Corinthians, the prefatory letter of which is dated January 24 (9 Calends February), 1546.<sup>57</sup> This antedates the initial draft (March 22) of the Tridentine canon on Scripture, which contains the famously debated “partim ... partim” clause, that the truths of salvation “are contained partly in the Sacred Scriptures, and partly in the unwritten traditions which the Apostles receive from Christ’s own lips or which, under the inspiration of the holy Spirit, were by them, as it were, passed down to us from hand to hand.”<sup>58</sup> Calvin, surely, had no advanced knowledge of the draft of the Canons, but he was certainly aware of such works as Johann Eck’s 1526 treatise on the Mass and its posing of the *partim ... partim* formula against Luther’s assumption of the Scriptural norm.<sup>59</sup>

53. Calvin, *Ad Thessalonicenses II*, 2:15, in *CO 52*, col. 207 (*CTS 2 Thess.*, 345).

54. John Calvin, *Ad Thessalonicenses II*, 2:15, in *CO 52*, col. 207 (*CTS 2 Thess.*, 344–345).

55. John Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Priorem ad Corinthios*, 11:2, in *CO 49*, col. 472 (*CTS 1 Cor.*, I, 350), hereinafter *Ad Corinthios I*.

56. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11:2, in *CO 49*, col. 473 (*CTS 1 Cor.*, I, 351).

57. John Calvin, *Commentarii in priorem epistolam Pauli ad Corinthos* (Strasbourg: Wendelin Rihel, 1546), sig. a iii verso.

58. As translated in Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, 2 vols., trans. Ernest Graf (St. Louis: B. Herder; London: Thomas Nelson, 1957–1961), II, 74; cf. the crucial phrase in Council of Trent, *Acta genuina Ss. oecumenici Concilii Tridentini sub Paulo III. Julio III. et Pio IV* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1874), 66: “ipsam evangelii veritatem partim contineri in libris scriptis, partim sine scripto traditionibus.”

59. Johann Eck, *Ad Invictissimum Poloniae regem Sigismundum, de sacrificio Missae Contra Lutheranos, libri tres* (Cologne: Johann Soter, 1526), fol. 25v, 26r; cf. Jedin, *History of*

Negatively, Calvin argued that the “Papists” appeal to Paul’s reference to *paradoseis* “in order to defend their traditions,” many of which are superstitions or “puerile ceremonies” that are not only contrary to God’s commands, but are turned into “tyrannical laws” that torment the conscience.<sup>60</sup> If Paul’s text does not support human traditions that place a burden on the conscience, as if accepting them were necessary to one’s salvation, Calvin acknowledges it does point toward a particular kind of unwritten apostolic traditions (*apostolorum traditiones non scriptas*) that “pertain to the order and government” of the church.” These traditions are not teachings that are necessary to salvation, but are “suitable and useful” rules or forms of church governance that serve to maintain order in cases where “the Lord has prescribed nothing definite.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, whereas Paul did teach that all such things be done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), these teachings had nothing to do with “trifles of ceremonies” and “monstrous rites of idolatry” such as are characteristic of “Popery.”<sup>62</sup> The statement that all things should be done “decently and in order,” Calvin argues, is a rule for the regulation of “external polity.” This advice of the Apostle, moreover, is a general rule for the preservation of “decorum” and the avoidance of “confusion,” stated in this way specifically to indicate that such ordinances are not “in themselves necessary” and are not intended to bind the conscience.<sup>63</sup> The verb *paradidomi* appears also in 1 Corinthians 11:23, where Paul teaches that what he received of the Lord” concerning the Lord’s supper he “also delivered [*quod etiam tradidi*]” to the Corinthian church—but, Calvin adds, what Paul delivered to the Corinthian church has no relation to the corrupt service of the Mass.<sup>64</sup> The same phrasing of receiving from Christ and delivering to the church occurs in 15:3—Calvin renders the verb as *tradidi*, but makes no further comment on delivery or tradition.<sup>65</sup>

Calvin, thus, identified two positive senses of the term “traditions” in the New Testament and, arguably, in the earliest churchly understanding of *paradosis*,<sup>66</sup> namely, the written tradition of biblical teachings concerning things necessary to salvation and the partly written, partly unwritten rules and forms of church

*the Council of Trent*, II, 75; with Heiko A. Oberman, “*Quo Vadis, Petre?* Tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*,” in *Dawn of the Reformation*, 269–296, here pp. 283–289.

60. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11:2, in *CO* 49, col. 473 (*CTS I Cor.*, I, 351–352).

61. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11:2, in *CO* 49, col. 473 (*CTS I Cor.*, I, 352); observed by Balsarak, “Authority of Scripture and Tradition,” 39, with reference to Calvin’s *Antidote to the Council of Trent*.

62. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11:2, in *CO* 49, col. 473 (*CTS I Cor.*, I, 352).

63. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 14:40, in *CO* 49, col. 535 (*CTS I Cor.*, I, 474).

64. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11:23, in *CO* 49, col. 484–485 (*CTS I Cor.*, I, 373–347); cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.19.

65. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios I*, 15:3, in *CO* 49, col. 536, 538 (*CTS I Cor.*, II, 9).

66. On which see G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics: Six Studies in Dogmatic Faith with Prologue and Epilogue* (London: S. P. C. K., 1940), 3–4, 12–13, 22–23.

governance that could be suited to the needs of “decency and order.” In the case of the teachings necessary to salvation, Paul delivered to the church, not what he invented, but what he had received from the Lord—and it is the church’s duty to deliver to future generations, not its innovations, but what it has received from the Lord, via Paul and the other apostles, followed by successive generations of the faithful. In the case of transmitted rules of decorum and piety, these do not bind the conscience and may be of temporary import.

2. *Tradition negatively understood as a human invention.* Given that the positive sense of a tradition or traditions was reserved to teachings and rules of practice that serve to maintain the faith of Christians by transmitting the “sound doctrine” of the Bible duly ordering the life of the church, there is no simple transfer of Paul’s positive view of tradition to the establishment of later traditions in the church. Following his positive comment on the meaning of *pardoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “stand firm, and hold the traditions which you have been taught,” Calvin turned to the problem of the “Papist” use of the text as justification for their own traditions. Their reasoning, he argues, is that since Paul was permitted to establish traditions, they also should be allowed to do so—and if Paul’s traditions were to be followed, so also ought theirs to be. Calvin acknowledges that Paul, as would later Christian writers, delivered rules for the governance of the church, but he counters first by noting the divinely inspired nature of Paul’s precepts and then by adding that it was not Paul’s intention “to ensnare consciences” by promulgating rules—and that such a practice would have been utterly “unlawful,” not only for Paul but for “all the Apostles together.” The Roman practice of passing off their traditions as apostolic, accordingly, is all the more unlawful.<sup>67</sup>

Calvin drew directly on Matthew 15:1–9 and its parallel in Mark 7:1–13, at verses 8 and 13 “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men [τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων] ... thus making void the word of God through your tradition [παράδοσει] which you hand on.” He also drew on the similar argument in Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men.” The phrase “tradition of men” used by Paul is identical to that found in Mark 7:8. In his *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Calvin followed the text of Matthew 15 with some collateral reference to Mark 7 to address directly the issue of disobedience to traditions:

When we speak of human traditions, this question has no reference to political laws, the use and object of which are widely different from enjoining the manner in which we ought to worship God. But as there are various kinds of human traditions, we must make some distinction among them. Some are

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67. Calvin, *In Epistolam ad Thessalonicenses II*, 2:15, in *CO* 52, col. 207 (*CTS 2 Thessalonians*, 345).

manifestly wicked, for they inculcate acts of worship which are wicked and diametrically opposed to the word of God. Others of them mingle profane trifles with the worship of God, and corrupt its purity. Others, which are more plausible, and are not chargeable with any remarkable fault, are condemned on this ground., that they are imagined to be necessary to the worship of God; and thus there is a departure from sincere obedience to God alone, and a snare is laid for the conscience.<sup>68</sup>

As an instance of an act harmless in itself, Calvin singles out the Pharisaic practice of washing hands, which could be an “allowable ceremony” were it not for the claim that God could not be properly worshiped without washings—after all, God’s law enjoins cleanliness and ritual washing, and Christ “permitted” the use of water pots at the marriage ceremony.<sup>69</sup> God then “permits ... outward ceremonies” as an exercise of piety and allows them to be aspects of the service of worship—but they are never to be confused with the Word of God. It was, therefore, a “great abuse, when ceremonies introduced by men began to be regarded as a part of divine worship; and again, when in matters that were free and voluntary uniformity was absolutely enjoined.”<sup>70</sup> Outward ceremonies must not be confused with the word of God and identified as necessary to salvation. A contemporary example of the problem is the Popish practice of sprinkling with “blessed water” for the purpose of exorcism, a practice that Calvin identifies as “absurd.” He adds, moreover, that even if the practice “were lawful in itself, and were not accompanied by so many abuses, still we must always condemn the urgency with which they demand it as if it were indispensable.”<sup>71</sup>

Christ’s response to the Pharisees, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God on account of your tradition,” divides into two parts: the first responds to the person (*ad personam*), the second to the substance and point at issue (*res et causa*).<sup>72</sup> Calvin points out that Christ’s argument is not immediately an acquittal of the disciples’ conduct. Rather, it turns the accusation back against the Pharisees—which is, in effect, Calvin’s own turning of the sixteenth-century accusation back on his Roman opponents. The Pharisees take offense when disciples fail to observe human commandments, but the Pharisees themselves obey human

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68. John Calvin, *Commentarius in Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:2, in *CO* 45, col. 447 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 247–248).

69. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:2, in *CO* 45, col. 447 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 248), citing John 2:6.

70. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:2, in *CO* 45, col. 448 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 248–249).

71. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:2, in *CO* 45, col. 448 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 250).

72. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:3, in *CO* 45, col. 448 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 250).

commandments with precision but, at the same time, disregard God's laws. It is not as if the Pharisees directly transgressed divine law—rather they did so indirectly: their insistence that holiness be achieved by a human commandment not belonging to the law of God leads, Calvin argues, to the belief that God's law can be disregarded. This "depravity," Calvin adds, is greater among the Papists of his own time than it ever was among the Jews.<sup>73</sup> He concludes his reading of the passage with a comment on Matthew 15:9, "in vain do they worship me, teaching doctrines, commandments of men":

Christ declares them to be mistaken who bring forward, in the place of doctrine, the commandments of men, or who seek to obtain from them the rule for worshipping God. Let it therefore be determined, that, since obedience is valued more by God than sacrifices, all kinds of invented worship are vain in his sight; indeed, as the prophet declares, they are accursed and detestable (1 Sam. 15:22, 23).<sup>74</sup>

Calvin reads the text, then, very specifically as a condemnation of the way in which traditional practices are enjoined as mandatory. Whereas some doctrines or commandments of human invention can be condemned outright as contrary to Scripture, others not evil in themselves are to be rejected as obscuring or replacing what God has actually commanded.

Calvin did, then, write fairly extensively on *tradio* or *paradosis* in his commentaries—indeed, nearly enough to constitute a moderately-sized *locus* after the manner of other commentators in his time. His exegetical remarks, in sum, embody both a positive approach to traditions that carry forward the biblical message of salvation and a negative approach to traditions that fail to respect the biblical message. Tradition in the singular meant, for Calvin, a particular teaching or rule governing belief or practice. What is absent from the exegesis is an undifferentiated use of the singular nouns *paradosis* or *tradio* to indicate the full body of extra-biblical churchly teaching. The exegesis yields, therefore, neither a general approbation nor a general condemnation of tradition as such. Rather, it yields a condemnation of specific traditional teachings and practices that either contradict Scripture or set it aside, and an approbation of traditional teachings and practices that serve church order or governance or that instruct in "sound doctrine" by positively transmitting the teachings of Scripture—a view largely in accord with Oberman's Tradition I.

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73. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:3, in *CO* 45, col. 449 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 251).

74. Calvin, *In Harmoniam Evangelicam*, Matt. 15:9, in *CO* 45, col. 451 (*CTS Harmony*, II, 254).



#### IV. Traditions and Authority in Calvin's "Antidote" to the Council of Trent

In 1547, one year after he published his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Calvin completed his tract addressing the first seven sessions of the Council of Trent. The decrees finalized in Trent's fourth session set forth the Council's decisions on the authoritative norms of doctrine. In the first decree, Trent affirmed the co-equal authority of Scripture and extra-scriptural tradition; and in the second decree asserted the interpretive authority of "holy mother church" against individuals "trusting in their own wisdom in matters of faith and morals."<sup>75</sup> Here, the language concerning Scripture and tradition has changed from the original draft of the canons: the *partim ... partim* clause in the draft of the decree has been edited to state that the "salvific truth and moral discipline is contained in written books and in unwritten traditions."<sup>76</sup> *Partim* has been replaced by *et*, but the sense is unchanged: God is the author of these traditions concerning faith and morals, "preserved in the church by continuous succession," inasmuch as they were either spoken by Christ or dictated by the Spirit.<sup>77</sup> (It needs to be emphasized that neither Calvin and other Reformers nor such post-Tridentine Counter-reformation luminaries as Melchior Cano and Cardinal Bellarmine viewed the slight editorial change in the final draft of the canons as implying anything other than the equal authority of Scripture and extra-scriptural traditions that contained truths not found in Scripture. Cano and Bellarmine pointedly upheld the two-source theory as normative and consistently read the *et* of the Tridentine canon as bearing the same significance as the earlier *partim ... partim* clause.<sup>78</sup>)

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75. *Canones et decreta sacrosancti oecumenici Concilii tridentini sub Paulo III., Iulio III. et Pio IV* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1866), "Decretum de editione et usu sacrorum librorum," 17; in translation, *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent, Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, trans. James Waterworth (London: Burns and Oates, 1888).

76. *Canones et decreta Concilii tridentini*, 15: "hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus."

77. *Canones et decreta Concilii tridentini*, 15.

78. There has been debate over the implication of the editorial shift from *partim...partim* to *et*, at least in part for the sake of arguing that Trent did not so much advocate a two-source theory like Oberman's Tradition II, but rather pointed toward a view of the "coinherence" of Scripture and tradition: see George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 88, 93. On this issue, see Joseph R. Geiselman, "Scripture and Tradition in Catholic Theology," in *Theology Digest* 6/2 (1958), 73–78; and Heiko A. Oberman, "*Quo Vadis, Petre?* Tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*," 287–289; also note Oberman's summary of the Roman Catholic debate over this issue in "Holy Spirit–Holy Writ–Holy Church: the Witness of the Reformation," in *Hartford Quarterly*, 5/1 (1964), 43–71, here pp. 49–50.

Calvin's response points out various extra-scriptural traditions were noted by "the old writers," but not in order to lead the faith "beyond the scriptures."<sup>79</sup> The church fathers did state that some of these "rites" had been handed down from the apostles, but other of their rites did not originate with the apostles. Some of these latter might be tolerated. The Roman Church, however, claims apostolic authority for all of their traditions, including those which arose, as Calvin comments, "not long ago." Calvin's response reflects what we have seen in his exegesis:

though we grant that the apostles of the Lord delivered by hand (*per manus tradidisse*) to posterity some things which they never committed to writing; first, this has nothing to do with the doctrine of faith ... but only with external rites supporting either order or discipline: further, it is still necessary for them to prove that everything to which they give the name is truly an apostolical tradition.<sup>80</sup>

In the absence of proof of apostolicity, the imposition of such traditions is tyrannical and an assault on the conscience.<sup>81</sup> Calvin, in other words, neither denies the existence of unwritten traditions nor subjects them to blanket condemnation. But he understands the Tridentine decrees as maintaining the two-source theory of saving truth. Insertion of the *et* in no way removes the implication of *partim ... partim*.<sup>82</sup> He therefore condemned unfounded claims of apostolicity that serve to justify the imposition of human traditions on the conscience, as if these were authoritative or necessary to salvation. Polemics aside, Calvin's criticisms noted what one recent study has identified as "weaknesses" in the Tridentine formulations given the Council's "affirmations of apostolic origins for beliefs and practices where there were none."<sup>83</sup>

Calvin returns to the problem of human traditions in his response to the decree of the seventh session of Trent, which pronounced an anathema against anyone who denied the institution of all of the sacraments by Christ or who enumerated either more or fewer than seven sacraments, namely, baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders, and marriage.<sup>84</sup> Determination of the number of sacraments at seven, Calvin pointed out, had the support neither of Scripture nor of

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79. John Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae cum Antidoto* (Geneva: Jean Girard, 1547); in *CO 7*, col. 365–506, here col. 412; in translation, *Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, in *Selected Works*, III, 17–188, here p. 69.

80. Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae*, in *CO 7*, col. 413 (*Selected Works*, III, 70).

81. Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae*, in *CO 7*, col. 413 (*Selected Works*, III, 70).

82. Cf. the comments in Oberman, "*Quo Vadis Petre*," 286–289.

83. John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 249.

84. *Canones et decreta Concilii tridentini*, 42–43.

any “approved author.”<sup>85</sup> Baptism and the “holy supper” were specifically “commended” by Christ, but the other five practices are not commended specifically by Christ, nor were they known as sacraments “for many ages” after him. There is no danger for Christians to rely on the authority of Christ at the same time that they “repudiate” what has been invented by human beings and rests solely on human authority.<sup>86</sup> Beyond the problem of the five false sacraments, a clear example of human invention in sacramental theology is the Roman doctrine of the operation of sacraments *ex opere operato*, as if grace were conferred by human action. This notion, Calvin comments, is the invention of “untutored monks ... who had never learned anything of the nature of sacraments,” and who failed to recognize that God alone bestows grace.<sup>87</sup>

#### V. Traditions, Conscience, and the Powers of the Church in Calvin’s *Institutes*

The basic pattern of argument concerning traditions characteristic of Calvin’s early works, namely the 1536 and 1539 *Institutes*, the 1539 *Response to Sadoleto*, reinforced by the response to Trent and buttressed by Calvin’s exegesis of the New Testament, was continued in the various subsequent editions of Calvin’s *Institutes*, where the 1536 text was largely retained with some augmentation.

The nature of conscience and the issue of identification of legitimate requirements or rules that could bind the conscience remained subjects of deep concern to Calvin and his associates in the organization and management of church and society in Geneva.<sup>88</sup> In the forefront of Calvin’s mind was his perception of the problems of human norms and divergences among traditionary beliefs, as evident in an added section in the 1559 *Institutes*: “in regulating the worship of God, the custom of a city, or the consent of antiquity, is a too feeble and fragile a bond of piety; it remains that God himself must bear witness to himself from heaven.”<sup>89</sup> The “Papists,” of course, claim

that their traditions are not from themselves but from God. For they say that the church is being governed by the Holy Spirit, to keep it from erring; that

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85. Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae*, in CO 7, col. 491 (*Selected Works*, III, 172).

86. Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae*, in CO 7, col. 493 (*Selected Works*, III, 173).

87. Calvin, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae*, in CO 7, col. 495 (*Selected Works*, III, 176).

88. See Thompson, “Confessions, Conscience, and Coercion in the Early Calvin”; Timothy Ronald Scheuers, “Charitable Bonds: Oaths, Confession of Faith, and the Binding of the Conscience in the Era of Calvin and His Contemporaries” (PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2021); also note the theological study, Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

89. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.13; new text, 1559.

its authority resides in them. This point gained, it follows immediately that their traditions are the revelations of the Holy Spirit and cannot be despised except in impious contempt of God. And that they may not seem to have attempted anything without great authorities, they want us to believe that a good part of their observances has come down from the apostles.<sup>90</sup>

Calvin responds that “to trace the origin of these traditions by which the Church has hitherto been oppressed back to the apostles is pure deceit, since the whole doctrine of the apostles has this intent, that conscience must not be burdened with new observances, nor the worship of God contaminated with our own inventions.”<sup>91</sup> In his sermon on Titus 1:15, Calvin took the opportunity to identify those whose “mind and conscience is defiled” with individuals who observed “traditions” of Popery in which a positive relationship with God was bound up with “works of supererogation”—as if God could be satisfied with ritual payments. Even if these traditions or rites were not by nature evil in themselves, when placed under the strictures stated by the apostle, they are nothing other than sinful and unclean.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, the rites and ceremonies against which the Reformers protested were obviously not from the apostles but had “crept in gradually” over the course of centuries.<sup>93</sup> The “histories and ancient records” of the church confirm the fact that the apostles never heard of or contemplated such teachings.<sup>94</sup>

Calvin also took into consideration the Roman argument based on John 16:12, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” that the apostles added further truths, beyond the canonical text of Scripture, to be conveyed by an oral tradition or that, more simply, the church found it necessary to add the written account of apostolic teaching. Not to disregard the subordinate authority of tradition, Calvin countered the argument first by citing Augustine, who had commented on the same text, “When the Lord said nothing, who of us may say, ‘These things are or those things are?’ Or if one dare say so, what proof does he provide?”<sup>95</sup> According to Augustine, believers ought not to expect to hear from the church of their own times what Christ held back from the disciples—nor should they expect to know these things from any source in the present life, but only in future

90. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), vi (430–431); retained in *Institutes*, IV.x.17.

91. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), vi (450); retained *Institutes*, IV.x.18.

92. Calvin, *Sermons sur l’Epistre à Tite* (1561), sermon 9 on 1:15–16, in *CO* 54, col. 488.

93. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.18; new text, 1559.

94. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), vi (450); retained *Institutes*, IV.x.18.

95. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.14; new text, 1559; cf. Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, xcvi.4 in *NPNF*, 1<sup>st</sup> series, VII, 373. Note the similar argument and use of Augustine in John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), III, 70.

perfection.<sup>96</sup> The simple truth is that the writings of the apostles contain as much of God's revelation as was promised and given to the apostles.<sup>97</sup> In his commentary on the passage, he notes that the "Papists ... wickedly abuse" the passage, as if the apostles were promised "new revelations" beyond Scripture. He again references Augustine as refuting the Roman claim, but also argues that the subsequent promise of the "Spirit of truth" offers the definitive refutation, the promise of truth standing as a guarantee of the truth of the apostolic writings, all set down after Christ's resurrection. "Whoever imagines that anything must be added to [the apostles'] doctrine, as if it were imperfect and but half-finished, not only accuses the apostles of dishonesty, but blasphemes against the Spirit."<sup>98</sup>

Nor was Calvin's complaint over human traditions a uniform condemnation of extra-biblical church practice. Calvin offered a fairly clear way to distinguish between those human traditions that are permissible, indeed, to be advocated and observed, and those that are to be condemned. Throughout his writings, from the earliest to the latest, he recognized that ordinances, practices, rules, and regulations are as necessary to the life of the church as they are to civil society. These traditional aspects of Christian life could and should change to meet the needs of various times and places, with the proviso that the church order should respect the Apostle Paul's requirement that "all things be done decently and in order."<sup>99</sup> As he had pointed out in his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:12, there was even a valid place for unwritten traditions of the Apostles pertaining to the order and governance of the church.<sup>100</sup> His polemic was directed specifically against extra-biblical rules and churchly "constitutions" that were extraneous to the proper order and governance of the church but nevertheless claimed to bind the conscience.

Accordingly, Calvin divided his discussion of church power into three sections, the first dealing with church power relative to the "rules" or "bases of the faith," the *fidei dogmata*, and with the authority of church councils;<sup>101</sup> the second with the power of the papacy in making laws binding on Christians;<sup>102</sup> and the third with the nature and extent of church jurisdiction in the governance and discipline of spiritual life.<sup>103</sup>

In dealing with the question concerning the authority of church councils and of the related question of identifying the true interpretation of Scripture in teaching and practice, Calvin places the right to interpret squarely in the church and affirms the

96. Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, xcvi.5 in *NPNF*, 1<sup>st</sup> series, VII, 373.

97. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.14; new text, 1559.

98. John Calvin, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, in *CO*, col. 362 (*CTS John*, II, 142–143).

99. Calvin, *Institutes*, (1536), vi (465); retained in *Institutes*, IV.x.27, citing 1 Cor. 14:40.

100. Calvin, *Ad Corinthios*, 11:2, in *CO* 49, col. 473 (*CTS 1 Cor.*, I, 352), as cited above.

101. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii–ix.

102. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.

103. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xi–xii.

tradition of obedient interpretation at the same time that he relativizes all human authority and recognizes the problem of error. In the first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin cited 1 John 4:1, “believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God,” with the caveat, “Does this not sufficiently declare that it is very important what sort of pastors should be heard, and that not all are to be heard indiscriminately.”<sup>104</sup> In his commentary on the text, he argues that “fit judges” of the meaning of Scripture need to be “directed by the spirit of discernment,” and then qualifies his argument with a distinction between the private or personal and public or corporate purposes of judgment. In his commentary, he began his exposition by acknowledging the critical point that “If every one has the right and the liberty to judge, nothing can be settled as certain, but on the contrary the whole of religion will be uncertain.” Contrary to the claim that assertion of Scripture as the final norm opened the way to highly individualized and uncertain readings, Calvin presented a “twofold trial of doctrine, public and private.”<sup>105</sup> There certainly is a private trial or test of doctrinal authority that “settles” or confirms the faith of an individual and yields “acquiescence” to teaching that a person recognizes to “come from God.”<sup>106</sup> But this personal confirmation does not yield doctrine for the whole church:

Public trial refers to the common consent and polity of the Church; for as there is danger lest fanatics should rise up, who may presumptuously boast that they are endued with the Spirit of God, it is a necessary remedy, that the faithful meet together and seek a way by which they may agree in a holy and godly manner.<sup>107</sup>

Calvin’s resolution of the problem of biblical interpretation and true doctrine rests on the assumption “that no power was given to the Church to set up any new doctrine,”<sup>108</sup> beyond what was delivered in Scripture. Given that teachers should not be “heard indiscriminately” and that the teachings of individuals should be tested by “the faithful” meeting “together,” there remains in the church the power and the duty to interpret the text. Calvin can even argue

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104. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), vi (459); retained in *Institutes*, IV.ix.12; also citing Jer. 23:16; Matt. 7:15; 1 John 4:1; and Matt 15:14, the latter text referring to the blind leading the blind. Note that Battles adds Gal. 1:8, to which Calvin alludes but does not cite.

105. Calvin, *In Iohannis Apostoli Epistola*, 1 John 4:1, in CO 55, col. 348 (*CTS 1 John*, 231).

106. Calvin, *In Iohannis Apostoli Epistola*, 1 John 4:1, in CO 55, col. 348 (*CTS 1 John*, 231).

107. Calvin, *In Iohannis Apostoli Epistola*, 1 John 4:1, in CO 55, col. 348 (*CTS 1 John*, 231).

108. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.13; new text, 1559.

that when any doctrine is brought under discussion, there is not a better or surer remedy than for a council of true bishops to meet and discuss the controverted point. There will be much more weight in a decision of this kind, to which the pastors of churches have agreed in common after invoking the Spirit of Christ, than if each, adopting it for himself, should deliver it to his people, or a few individuals should meet in private and decide.<sup>109</sup>

The most basic Christian piety points to the need for examination of doctrine in and throughout the church so that a novel doctrine can be duly assessed and its validity decided “according to Scripture”—for the sake both of ending doubts among Christians and of stopping “the mouths of wicked and restless men.” This, Calvin adds, is precisely what occurred in the debates over Arianism.<sup>110</sup>

Still, one ought not to conclude, as the “Romanists” do, “that every interpretation of Scripture that has received the votes of a council is true and certain.”<sup>111</sup> This claim that conciliar decisions, as such, are true, certain, and unquestionable is, in Calvin’s view, a “pretext” of the Roman Church to make the further claim that all conciliar decisions are true and certain interpretations of Scripture. This extension of the claim was the case with conciliar and churchly decisions relating to “purgatory, intercession of saints, and auricular confession,” concerning which “not one syllable can be found in Scripture.”<sup>112</sup> Calvin provides two major examples of the problem. The institution of the Lord’s Supper by Christ himself (Matt. 26:26) teaches that all should receive the cup—but the Council of Constance reserved the cup to the priests, as if this were the teaching of Scripture. So also, Paul identifies the prohibition of marriage as a “doctrine of devils” (1 Tim. 4:1, 3), and Scripture declares that marriage “is honorable in all” (Heb. 13:4)—but the Roman Church forbids the marriage of priests, as if this were “a true and genuine teaching of Scripture.”<sup>113</sup> Calvin concludes,

I will ask them one thing, if the authority of Scripture is founded on the approbation of the Church, which council will they cite for a decree to that effect? I believe they have none.<sup>114</sup>

Councils, then, do provide a means of establishing doctrine that can assess the claims of individuals and offer examples of the obedient interpretation of Scripture in church—but councils can err, and have done so grievously.

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109. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.13; new text, 1559.

110. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.13; new text, 1559.

111. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.13; new text, 1559.

112. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.14; new text, 1559.

113. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.14; new text, 1559.

114. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.14; new text, 1559.

The problem of error and false claims of authoritative human traditions follows as the second part of Calvin's argument, namely concerning the "power, which, according to them, consists in the enacting of laws." This point, arguably, marks a development of Calvin's thought in the assignment of a particular origin to problematic human traditions. It is from these exercises of power in the enactment of unnecessary laws that "innumerable" human "traditions have arisen" and become "deadly snares to miserable souls."<sup>115</sup> The issue, moreover, is not rules and laws in general, but the church's power to bind consciences with rules concerning worship. Further, the issue is not merely whether the church may set forth rules for the ordering of worship, but specifically how church order reflects "the rule laid down by [God], and how spiritual freedom which looks to God may remain unimpaired."<sup>116</sup> Calvin can add, "Nor do we scorn the church (as our adversaries falsely assert, to render us hateful); but we give the church the praise of obedience, than which she knows no greater."<sup>117</sup> The corporate obedience of the church to the Word of God, then, is to be praised—while, as an aspect of their obedience, individual Christians should "simply want to understand what are those human traditions of all times that should be repudiated by the church and by all godly people."<sup>118</sup> In general, such traditions are

all laws apart from God's Word, laws made by human beings, either to prescribe the manner of worshiping God or to bind consciences by scruples, as if they were making rules about things necessary for salvation ... [these traditions] obscure by their multitude the clarity of the gospel, ... they are in no sense constructive but are useless and trifling occupations rather than true exercises of piety, ... they are calculated for sordid and base gain, ... they are too difficult to observe, ... they are befouled with shameful superstitions.<sup>119</sup>

### Conclusion

If tradition is understood as what Oberman called "the history of obedient interpretation," Calvin often drew on it—although he did not employ the singular noun "tradition" in a broad and generalized sense. When Calvin's consideration of "traditions" (i.e., the plural form) is examined, he did have, contrary to one writer's opinion, an extensive doctrine of tradition or traditions, and it was not merely

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115. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.1; new text, 1559; cf. ix.2–3; 9–11, 13, 16–19.

116. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.1; new text, 1559.

117. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), vi (437); retained *Institutes*, IV.x.18: Neque enim (quod nostri adversarii ad faciendam nobis invidiam inique mentiuntur) ecclesiam ludibrio habemus; sed obedientiam laudem, qua majorem nullam agnoscit, illi tribuimus."

118. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.16; new text, 1559.

119. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.16; new text, 1559.



polemical. Calvin identified as positive or acceptable traditions various teachings and ordinances that had been handed down and that stood in accordance with Scripture. He had a broadly positive, albeit sometimes critical and selective, understanding of the teachings of the church fathers and of the ancient councils and viewed them as allies in the struggle against false teachings, including those of Rome. Calvin, like other Reformers of his era, allowed for some positive doctrine taught by the “safer scholastics,” the *saniore scolastici*.<sup>120</sup> His exegesis of Scripture bears witness to careful consideration of prior interpretations of texts, and frequently, whether explicitly or implicitly, drew on the interpretations of the church fathers and on the approaches of medievals like Nicholas of Lyra. And his understanding of the meaning of the text for the church often reflected the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical readings characteristic of medieval exegesis, albeit filtered through an insistence on the literal or narrative sense of the text.<sup>121</sup>

As Calvin’s exegesis of New Testament passages concerning *paradoiseis* reveals, he made a clear distinction between tradition as the legitimate delivery of biblical teaching and tradition as the imposition of doctrines, rules, and regulations, all of human origin, that could not be justified on the basis of Scripture. His assumption of the primary and normative status of Scripture did not, therefore proclaim *sola Scriptura* as if Christians ought to rule out tradition, certainly not if tradition is understood as referring to the history of obedient interpretation.

Even so, contrary to the claims of Congar, Gregory, and others, a careful reading of the Reformer’s writings demonstrates that the denial of religiously binding *humanas traditiones* is not a disavowal of tradition in general—it is not even a denial of the legitimate use of extra-biblical traditionary church practices. Gregory is particularly guilty of cherry-picking texts, citing them out of context, and gluing his results together in a way that assimilates the effects of the magisterial Reformation to forms of spiritualistic individualism.<sup>122</sup> But just as the declamations of Calvin and other Reformers against “vain philosophy,” based on the exegesis of Colossians 2:8, were carefully qualified as not protesting against all philosophy, so also were their complaints against human traditions, not protests against tradition in general (a usage largely absent from their thought) or, indeed, against all human traditions. Calvin’s polemics against “human traditions” were specifically directed

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120. See David S. Sytsma, “Reformed Reception of Aquinas in the Sixteenth Century,” in Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 121–143.

121. Cf. Richard A. Muller, “The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom,” in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, edited, with an introduction by David C. Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 68–82; with idem, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 471–472.

122. Contra Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 141; Avideno, “Two Reformers and Tradition,” 59; and note Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 88, 94–96.

against what he saw as a history of comparatively recent disobedient interpretations of Scripture and obviously invented practices intended to bind the conscience and are proclaimed as necessary to salvation, but which have no basis in Scripture. To borrow a phrase from Brad Gregory, such traditions do not provide valid or useful answers to “Life Questions.” As to the positive Pauline references to *paradosis*, that is precisely what Calvin identified as the purpose of his sermons, commentaries, treatises, and ecclesiastical ordinances—the handing down of the biblical truths concerning God and salvation and of rules for the life and worship of the church.