

# Calvin's Understanding of Adam's Relationship to His Posterity: Recent Assertions of the Reformer's "Federalism" Evaluated

Aaron Denlinger

The past four centuries have witnessed some disagreement regarding John Calvin's understanding of Adam's relationship to humankind. That Calvin perceived the first man, depicted in the opening chapters of Genesis to be the common biological ancestor of humankind has not been questioned. Calvin's recognition of a radical (or realistic) relationship between Adam and his posterity—indicated, for example, by his designation of Adam as the "corrupt root" (*putrefacta radix*) from which "corrupt branches" (*putridi rami*) proceed—has also generally been acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> The question that *has* occasioned dispute regarding Calvin's doctrine is whether or not he perceived Adam to sustain a representative (or federal) relationship to his posterity in addition to the radical relationship just indicated.

Interest in this particular aspect of Calvin's thought springs, at least in part, from the recognition that *later* Reformed theologians did perceive Adam's relationship to his descendants to be both radical and representative in kind. Francis Turretin articulated a conviction common to seventeenth-century Reformed theologians when he noted: "the bond between Adam and his posterity is twofold: (1) natural, as he is the father, and we are his children; (2) political and forensic, as he was the prince and representative

---

My thanks to several friends who read and critiqued an early draft of this work; namely, Nicholas Thompson, David Gilland, and Mark McDowell.

<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.1.7; *Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. 2 [Brunsvigae apud C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1864], 181–82). The *Calvini opera* volumes (from the *Corpus Reformatorum*) will be referenced subsequently as *CO*, with notice of the appropriate volume and page (for example, *CO* 2:181–82). Citations of Calvin's *Institutes*, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Ford Lewis Battles's English translation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

head of the whole human race.”<sup>2</sup> The twofold bond indicated by Turretin supplied the rationale, in Reformed thought, for humankind’s participation in the moral corruption and guilt that ensued from Adam’s violation of God’s command in the garden. The natural relationship explained the transmission of corruption from Adam to his descendants; the political or representative relation explained the imputation of Adam’s guilt to his descendants—guilt, that is, for the actual sin that he committed. Inasmuch as Adam acted in a representative capacity when he violated God’s law, it was argued, those whom he represented were accountable for his crime.<sup>3</sup> Reformed theologians discovered a theoretical basis for this political relationship between Adam and his posterity in the covenant that God purportedly established with Adam in the original state. As another seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, Anthony Burgess, noted: “by God’s covenant we were looked upon as in [Adam].”<sup>4</sup> Hence, in Reformed theological discourse, the term federal—from the Latin *foedus*—became, over time, largely synonymous with representative as a descriptive of Adam’s peculiar relationship to his posterity.

The debate regarding Calvin’s own perception of a representative role performed by Adam has, then, always been—whether implicitly or explicitly—a debate about the degree of theological continuity between Calvin and his successors in the Reformed tradition. In this article, I will briefly sketch the course of the debate regarding Calvin’s doctrine of Adam’s relationship to humankind, summarize the arguments that have been advanced for a doctrine of Adam’s representation in Calvin’s thought, and critique those arguments. I am, of course, principally interested in arguments that have been advanced in more recent scholarship.<sup>5</sup> My critique extends not only to conclusions reached regarding Calvin’s thought but also—and in some sense more significantly—to the methodology that underpins recent affirmations of Calvin’s federalism. The tendency of recent scholarship has been to evaluate Calvin’s thought almost entirely in relation to that of subsequent (Reformed) thinkers. Such a method inevitably tends toward anachronistic readings of Calvin’s theology. Comparisons of Calvin’s thought to the theology of later individuals and/or groups should be made but only after Calvin’s thought has been considered within its own proper contexts. I will attempt in the process of critiquing recent arguments regarding Calvin’s doctrine to emphasize those contexts that actually informed his thinking and thereby provide a more accurate portrayal of his doctrine. I will argue that Calvin’s understanding of Adam’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Giger, ed. James Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992), 616.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:613–29.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Treatise of Original Sin* (London, 1658), 46.

<sup>5</sup> That scholarship will be noted below, in the course of sketching the debate in question.

relationship to humankind closely reflects the consistent teaching of the Christian tradition in the centuries preceding him. Calvin's doctrine might best be described as *typical realism*; he did not, in other words, recognize any representative relationship between Adam and his descendants.

### **The Debate Regarding Calvin's Understanding of Adam's Relationship to Humankind**

Disagreement regarding Calvin's recognition of Adamic representation surfaced in the seventeenth-century. Josué de la Place (in Latin, Placaeus), professor of theology at Saumur in France, claimed Calvin's support for his own rejection of the representative notion advanced by his Reformed contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> La Place recognized only a realistic relationship between Adam and humankind that served as the basis for the transmission of Adam's own corruption to his descendants. If individuals own any *guilt* as an aspect of original sin, he argued, it is guilt for the corruption residing in them by virtue of their natural descent from Adam. His doctrine admitted no place for the "immediate imputation" of guilt for Adam's actual transgression to humankind. La Place denied, moreover, the existence of any covenant between God and Adam—that notion that supplied a theoretical basis for the representative relationship recognized by his orthodox peers.<sup>7</sup>

La Place's teaching was countered by a number of Reformed theologians, among them Francis Turretin, whose conviction regarding Adam's representation of humankind has been noted above. Turretin provided ample biblical and theological argument to prove Adam's representative role and the immediate imputation of Adam's guilt to every individual that that role, to his thinking, entailed. Turretin did not fail, moreover, to challenge la Place's insistence that Calvin, like la Place himself, recognized only a realistic relationship between Adam and humankind. Having thoroughly outlined his own doctrine, Turretin noted: "Many things prove that this was the opinion of Calvin."<sup>8</sup>

Turretin undoubtedly won the ecclesiastical struggle that evolved from this theological dispute. The *Formula Consensus Helvetica* of 1675 condemned the doctrine of those who "deny that Adam represented his posterity by God's intention."<sup>9</sup> The Swiss Reformed Church required its ministers to subscribe to the *Formula*, thereby confessing their agreement with

---

<sup>6</sup> See William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1862), 380–82.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 382. Cunningham cites la Place's *De imputatione primi peccati Adami* (1665), 18, 22, 27, 170–72, 245, 253.

<sup>8</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:627.

<sup>9</sup> *Formula Consensus Helvetica*, art. 12 (emphasis mine). Martin Klauber has recently produced an English translation of the *Formula*. See *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 103–23.

Turretin's doctrine of a "twofold bond" between Adam and humankind. However, the disagreement regarding Calvin's perspective on the matter was not so easily, or at least so decisively, settled. In the nineteenth-century, the question of Calvin's doctrine was revisited by George Park Fisher, ecclesiastical historian at Yale Divinity School, and William Cunningham, principal of New College in Edinburgh.<sup>10</sup> Fisher supported la Place's historical judgment, denying any doctrine of Adamic representation in Calvin's thought.<sup>11</sup> Cunningham sided with Turretin, insisting that Calvin "plainly enough asserted" Adam's representation and the immediate imputation of Adam's guilt to his descendants.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, the doctrine of immediate imputation, as it relates to the notion of original sin has attracted very little theological attention. The question of whether Calvin perceived a representative relationship between Adam and his descendants has, however, continued to generate interest. That question has, to be sure, been subsumed into a broader debate regarding the degree of theological continuity between Calvin's theology of the original state and Reformed theology's doctrine of the pre-Fall covenant. Holmes Rolston III, Donald J. Bruggink, and James B. Torrance, among others, have argued that Reformed theology's doctrine of the covenant of works constitutes a significant point of departure from Calvin's thought.<sup>13</sup> Rolston, for example, identifies the notion of a pre-Fall covenant as "totally absent from Calvin," and adds: "More seriously, [the notion's] fundamental incompatibility with Calvin's thought has gone all but unnoticed."<sup>14</sup>

Such assertions have not, of course, lacked a scholarly *sed contra*. Peter Lillback, in a recent monograph exploring "Calvin's role in the development of covenant theology," has provided the most extensive rebuttal to the assertion that the covenant of works doctrine is absent from and incompatible with Calvin's theology.<sup>15</sup> Lillback is sensitive to the diffi-

---

<sup>10</sup> See Cunningham, *Reformers*, 371–35; George Park Fisher, "The Augustinian and the Federal Theories of Original Sin Compared," *The New Englander* 27, 104 (1868): 468–517, esp. 483–85.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, "Theories," 483–85.

<sup>12</sup> Cunningham, *Reformers*, 379.

<sup>13</sup> Holmes Rolston III, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129–56; Donald J. Bruggink, "Calvin and Federal Theology," *The Reformed Review* 13 (1959): 15–22; James B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession*, ed. Alisdair Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrews, 1982): 40–53.

<sup>14</sup> Rolston, "Responsible Man," 129.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). See also Lillback's earlier article, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981): 247–88.

culty of demonstrating theological agreement between the covenant of works concept and Calvin's teaching, given the significant number of theological propositions comprised in, or implicated by, that covenant concept. He proceeds by comparing Calvin's thought, point for point, with the various theological commitments that constitute the covenant of works doctrine as a whole. This task, of course, eventually involves him in the question of whether Calvin recognized Adam as humankind's representative in the original state. Lillback is unambiguous in his verdict, insisting that Calvin recognized Adam as humankind's "legal representative," and articulated "a definitive federalism" consistent with later Reformed teaching.<sup>16</sup> This conclusion provides a partial basis for Lillback's ultimate suggestion that "Calvin [developed] the prelapsarian experience of Adam in language consonant with the covenant of works."<sup>17</sup> Similar, if slightly subdued, conclusions regarding Calvin's recognition of Adam's representative role have been reached in works by Lyle Bierma and Paul Helm.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Arguments for a Doctrine of Adam's Representation in Calvin's Thought**

There are, essentially, three arguments that have been advanced to demonstrate Calvin's recognition of a representative relationship between Adam and humankind. The first is, admittedly, not a positive argument as such, but an explanation for why Calvin did not *express* his conviction regarding Adam's representation as clearly as he might have done. That explanation focuses on Calvin's historical-polemical context. Turretin, for example, notes that Calvin did not emphasize Adam's representative role and the imputation of Adam's guilt to his descendants "because he disputed against Albert Pighius and Ambrose Catharinus," contemporary Catholic theologians "who made the entire nature of original sin to consist solely in the imputation of the first sin, recognizing no inherent corruption."<sup>19</sup> In other words, Calvin, intent on proving that which Pighius and Catharinus ostensibly denied, focused his efforts on demonstrating Adam's realistic relationship to humankind—that relationship that provided a rationale for every individual's innate depravity. Cunningham develops this historical argument far more thoroughly

---

<sup>16</sup> Lillback, "Ursinus's Doctrine," 280.

<sup>17</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, 304.

<sup>18</sup> Lyle Bierma, "Law and Grace in Ursinus' Doctrine of the Natural Covenant: A Reappraisal" in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999): 96–110; Paul Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): 65–81.

<sup>19</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:627.

than does Turretin. He describes the activities of Pighius and Catharinus at the Council of Trent, outlines their teaching on original sin, notes the positive regard that other Catholic theologians had for their teaching, and identifies their doctrine as “the true cause or explanation” of why Calvin did not clearly articulate the representative nature of Adam’s relationship to humankind.<sup>20</sup> Lillback merely mentions Catharinus—“who held to a federalist understanding of original sin”—in passing and notes that Cunningham discovers in Catharinus’s teaching “the reason for Calvin’s failure to come to grips with this doctrine” (the reason, that is, for Calvin’s failure to articulate his conviction regarding Adam’s representation).<sup>21</sup>

A second argument notes Calvin’s “commitment to the Adam-Christ parallel,” and suggests that this commitment *implies* his recognition of a representative role performed by Adam.<sup>22</sup> This line of argument is advanced by Lillback, Bierma, and Helm. Calvin’s recognition of Adam’s representation can, they argue, be deduced from his comments on *Christ’s* representation in conjunction with his comments on the Adam-Christ analogy that is developed in certain biblical texts. Thus, for example, Helm states: “Calvin underlines his understanding of Adam as a federal head in connection with his treatment of Christ as the second Adam in his comments on Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.”<sup>23</sup> Lillback and Bierma make similar suggestions. An unfortunate editing error in Bierma’s work attributes Bierma’s words—ostensibly intended to paraphrase Calvin’s thought on this point—directly to Calvin himself. This error renders Calvin affirming that “Christ, the second Adam, represented [elect] humanity in living obediently before the law of God and in taking upon himself the penalty for the first Adam’s representative disobedience.”<sup>24</sup> This error, of course, seriously prejudices the question of whether Calvin recognized a representative role performed by Adam.

A third—and in my judgment, most substantial—argument asserts that Calvin *does* affirm Adam’s representative role, particularly in one passage from his chapter on original sin in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. That passage reads:

[T]he beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendants. For the contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and

---

<sup>20</sup> Cunningham, *Reformers*, 377–79.

<sup>21</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, 284.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Helm, “Calvin and the Covenant,” 74.

<sup>24</sup> Bierma, “Law and Grace,” 105.

the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him.<sup>25</sup>

This text has, to be sure, obtained the status of a *locus classicus* in recent arguments for Calvin's doctrine of Adam's representation. Lillback asserts: "This passage reflects Calvin's understanding of the federalist view of [Adam as] both *root* and representative *head*."<sup>26</sup> He explains:

Calvin's use of the phrase "at one and the same time ... both for himself and his descendants" strongly implies that Calvin did not conceive of [Adam's] sin so much as the whole of humanity actually sinning in Adam (realism) as that Adam as "ordained by God" lost for "himself and for his descendants" the divine gifts belonging to the human race *as their legal representative*.<sup>27</sup>

Bierma describes "the principle of federal headship" as "adumbrated in Calvin" on the basis of this text. He notes: "[L]ike so many other aspects of the later covenant of works, this incipient federalism represents a strand of thinking in Calvin that reappears in almost identical form in Ursinus a generation later and in a more developed way in later Reformed covenant thought."<sup>28</sup> Helm, too, cites this passage as evidence for Calvin's "understanding of Adam as a federal head."<sup>29</sup>

### **Critique of the Arguments for a Doctrine of Adam's Representation in Calvin's Thought**

Of the arguments noted, the second and third have received more attention in recent scholarship. Indeed, only Lillback makes reference—and that very briefly—to the issue of Calvin's supposed historical-polemical context. However, previous scholars—especially Cunningham—relied on this point rather heavily. Because the issue of Calvin's relationship to Pighius and Catharinus has, to my knowledge, never been seriously addressed in recent literature, I will briefly comment on it below. I will critique the arguments noted above in the order in which I have summarized them.

#### *Calvin's Doctrine a Reaction to the Teaching of Pighius and Catharinus*

Those with any knowledge of Pighius and Catharinus will immediately spot the historical errors in Cunningham's presentation of their activities and views. Cunningham depicts Pighius and Catharinus as active participants in the Council of Trent, where their doctrine of original sin—which

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; CO 2:182.

<sup>26</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, 285.

<sup>27</sup> Lillback, "Ursinus' Development," 279 (emphasis mine).

<sup>28</sup> Bierma, "Law and Grace," 104–5.

<sup>29</sup> Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 72, 74.

denied any inherent corruption in humankind as a result of Adam's transgression—was well-received by their Catholic peers. Pighius died in 1542, three years before the council convened. His doctrine was hardly well-received in his absence; among the various heresies and errors that the council members, when outlining their own agenda, purposed to address was that—in their words—“which Pighius appears to have followed.”<sup>30</sup> Pighius's doctrine was judged to be Pelagian, both by Council participants as well as the Catholic theological faculties of Louvain and Douai, and his *Controversies*—the 1541 work in which he first publicized his doctrine of original sin—eventually occupied a place on the *Index of Prohibited Books*.<sup>31</sup>

Among the chorus of Catholic thinkers condemning Pighius's doctrine was Ambrosius Catharinus.<sup>32</sup> Catharinus *did* participate in Trent, though there is no legitimate basis for Cunningham's assertion that Catharinus's doctrine was “very well received” there.<sup>33</sup> Catharinus's doctrine of original sin was, in actual fact, substantially different from Pighius's. Catharinus maintained that humankind *was* corrupted by Adam's sin, though, in the interest of terminological precision, he preferred to describe this corruption as an *effect* of original sin and identified the proper *substance* of original sin as Adam's actual transgression—a transgression that humankind committed in solidarity with Adam. Catharinus established humankind's solidarity with Adam in that transgression on the basis of a covenant that God purportedly made with Adam in the garden. In keeping with the terms of the covenant, he argued, Adam's sin was *interpreted* as every subsequent individual's sin.<sup>34</sup>

Catharinus's doctrine was rather novel in his day—the idea that human solidarity with Adam might rest primarily on a covenantal rather than realistic basis lacked obvious precedents. It was, perhaps, unsurprising that theologians later in the century somewhat confused his teaching and accused him of proposing a doctrine similar to Pighius's (though the Catholic Church, it should be noted, never condemned Catharinus's doctrine as it did Pighius's). More important (with regard to the question of Calvin's thought) is the substantial similarity that exists between certain aspects of Catharinus's doctrine and later Reformed teaching—enough similarity to legitimize the question of whether Calvin had reason to react against Catharinus and thereby downplay ideas that, had he expressed

---

<sup>30</sup> See Anthony Lane, “Albert Pighius's Controversial Work on Original Sin,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 4 (2000): 29–61, esp. 32–33.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, “Pighius's Controversial Work,” 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ambrosius Catharinus, *Summa doctrina de peccato originali* (Rome, 1550), 45r.

<sup>33</sup> Cunningham, *Reformers*, 378.

<sup>34</sup> Catharinus's doctrine of original sin is most accessible in his 1542 *De casu hominis et peccato originali*, which constitutes part of his collected *Opuscula* (Lyon, 1542).

them more clearly, would reveal greater continuity between his thought and that of his theological heirs. Catharinus did not employ the exact language of representation in describing Adam's relationship to humankind, but he certainly expressed that idea, and his notion of a covenantal basis for humankind's solidarity with Adam in his initial transgression is remarkably like Reformed theology's mature doctrine.

The question of some reaction to Catharinus and/or Pighius on Calvin's part is, in fact, quite easy to answer. One need merely compare Calvin's doctrine in the 1539 *Institutes* to his teaching in later editions of that work and search for evidence of some change in doctrine or emphasis—some change that would indicate a reactionary stance on Calvin's part.<sup>35</sup> Calvin would have had no knowledge of Pighius's or Catharinus's teaching on original sin when he published the 1539 edition of his *Institutes*. Pighius's thoughts on original sin were first publicized in 1541, as noted; Catharinus's first work on original sin—*Liber de peccato originali*—appeared in the same year (with subsequent works on original sin following in 1542, 1550, and 1551).<sup>36</sup> When, however, Calvin's 1539 *Institutes* is compared to later editions, it becomes immediately apparent that Calvin's doctrine did not undergo any significant change. The fifteen paragraphs—those addressing the topic of original sin, which introduce chapter two of the work in 1539, are repeated, with very minor changes, in every subsequent Latin edition of the work, including the final 1559 edition (where they constitute paragraphs 1–11 of book 2, chapter 2).<sup>37</sup> It is, then, simply not credible to suggest that Calvin failed to express his conviction regarding Adam's representation of humankind because, in Turretin's words, "he dis-

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *CO* 1:305–11; 2:175–85.

<sup>36</sup> A bibliography of Catharinus's works can be found in Vincenzo Criscuola, *Ambrogio Catarino Politi (1484–1553), Teologo e Padre al Concilio di Trento* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1985), 76–86. Catharinus had, it should be noted, published a work defending the immaculate conception of Mary in 1532 (*Disputatio pro veritate Immaculatae Conceptionis*). That work did contain a discussion of original sin. This creates the possibility that Calvin was aware (and reacting to) Catharinus's doctrine as early as 1539. Calvin himself, however, demonstrates that he had not read the work in question in his comments on Catharinus in his *Antidote to Trent* of 1547. Responding to a prefatory discourse that Catharinus delivered on the occasion of the Council's opening, Calvin refers to Catharinus as "the old antagonist of Luther," and notes: "I thought that under the confusion to which he was put twenty years ago, he had gone into some obscure corner to hide himself.... Those who formerly read the absurdities of Catharinus would not know that that putrid carcase is still breathing, did they not read his harangues delivered in the Council" (Calvin, *Antidote to Trent*, in *Selected Works* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 3:48). Calvin's comments clearly indicate that he was not familiar with Catharinus's theological work in the years subsequent to Catharinus's literary polemic with Luther in 1520 and 1521. It can be safely presumed, then, that Calvin's thoughts on original sin in 1539 were developed without any familiarity whatsoever with Pighius's or Catharinus's own doctrines.

<sup>37</sup> In the English translations of the *Institutes* these paragraphs constitute 2.1.1–2.1.11.

puted against Albertus Pighius and Ambrose Catharinus.”<sup>38</sup> His teaching on original sin remained consistent from the early years of his ministry—when he had no knowledge of Catharinus’s or Pighius’s teaching—until his death.

*Calvin’s Doctrine of Adamic Representation Implied by His  
Understanding of the Adam-Christ Analogy*

The argument that Calvin’s doctrine of Adam’s representation can be deduced from his recognition of Christ’s representation and his understanding of the Adam-Christ analogy is plausible. Indeed, Calvin introduces and comments upon the Adam-Christ analogy at length in his treatment of original sin: “We must surely hold that Adam was not only the progenitor but, as it were, the root of human nature; and that therefore in his corruption mankind deserved to be vitiated. This the apostle makes clear from a comparison of Adam with Christ.”<sup>39</sup> This, in conjunction with Calvin’s affirmation elsewhere that “the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us,” would seem to suggest—as Lillback, Bierma, and Helm argue—recognition on his part of a representative role performed by Adam.<sup>40</sup> However, close attention to the actual points of *similarity* and *dissimilarity* that Calvin highlights between Adam and Christ, when noting the biblical analogy that pertains between them, does not substantiate the argument in question.

Having introduced the “comparison of Adam with Christ” in his treatment of original sin, Calvin continues by noting that restoration in Christ “occurs in no other way than that wonderful communication (*mirifica communicatione*) whereby Christ transfuses into us (*in nos transfundit*) the power of his righteousness.”<sup>41</sup> Calvin does affirm a point of similarity between Adam and Christ. He does not, however, suggest that Adam and Christ agree in *representing* humankind/believers; they agree, rather, in *communicating* something to humankind/believers. This is not, of course, to suggest that Calvin teaches, in this context, a doctrine of justification by infused righteousness; it is to suggest that Calvin is not referencing justification when he develops the parallel between Adam and Christ in the interest of illuminating the nature of original sin. Calvin compares Adam’s *destructive* influence on humankind with Christ’s *sanctifying* influence on believers—a sanctifying influence that is realized through communication, not representation.

<sup>38</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:627.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6; *CO* 2:180.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *The True Method of Giving Peace*, in *Selected Works*, 3:244; *CO* 35:594. See Lillback, *Binding of God*, 285; Helm, “Calvin and the Covenant,” 74–75; Bierma, “Law and Grace,” 104–5.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6; *CO* 2:181.

Other texts where Calvin treats the Adam-Christ analogy demonstrate this to be a consistent feature of his thought: It is Christ's *sanctifying* influence upon believers that parallels Adam's influence on humankind. For example, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:45, quoted by Helm, Calvin notes: "[Adam] by his fall ruined himself and those that were his, because he drew them all, along with himself, into the same ruin: Christ came *to restore our nature from ruin*, and raise it up to a better condition than ever. They are then, as it were, two *sources*, or two *roots* of the human race."<sup>42</sup> Here again, the similarity between Adam and Christ lies in their actual *influence* on the human race. Adam vitiates nature; Christ restores—or raises—the same. Neither process occurs through representation. The conclusion that Calvin underlines his understanding of Adam as a federal head with these words is entirely unwarranted. No reference to a representative role performed by Adam *or* Christ can be found in at least these statements regarding the analogy between Christ and Adam.<sup>43</sup>

Calvin also, at times, stresses the dissimilarity between Adam and Christ while exploring the biblical analogy between them. His comments on Romans 5:12–19 are especially noteworthy. Calvin notes from the very first (v. 12): “we cannot see with so much clearness what we have in Christ, as by having what we have lost in Adam set before us, though *all things on both sides are not similar*.”<sup>44</sup> As Calvin continues to exegete the biblical text in question, he propounds his doctrine of justification with great clarity. The “wonderful communication whereby Christ transfuses into us the power of his righteousness” plays no part here, in the justification of sinners. Indeed, here Calvin insists: “the gift of righteousness is not a quality with which

---

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, 1 Corinthians 15:45 (first emphasis mine). In footnoted references to Calvin's commentaries, I have included merely biblical book, chapter, and verse. Citations are from William Pringle's English translations of Calvin's commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Bierma also references Calvin's comments on Adam and Christ in the *Institutes* 2.12.3 in support of his argument. Calvin writes: “The second requirement of our reconciliation with God was this: that man, who by his disobedience had become lost, should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfy God's judgment, and pay the penalties for sin. Accordingly, our Lord came forth as true man and took the person and the name of Adam in order to take Adam's place in obeying the Father, to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and, in the same flesh, to pay the penalty that we had deserved.” I acknowledge that Calvin *might* communicate a notion of *Christ's* representation of believers with these words (though it is a representation based on Christ's actual participation in genuine humanity—which is, of course, Calvin's primary dogmatic point; hence, he continues: “our common nature with Christ is the pledge of our fellowship with the Son of God; and clothed with our flesh he vanquished death and sin together that the victory and triumph might be ours”). In this paragraph, there is no explicit appeal to the Adam-Christ analogy in order to substantiate or illuminate the nature of Christ's (supposed) representative role. Thus, I can see no warrant for inferring Adamic representation in Calvin's thought from that which he says regarding Christ's genuine humanity and sacrificial work for believers in this text.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, Romans 5:12 (emphasis mine).

God endows us, as some absurdly explain it, but a gratuitous imputation of righteousness.” At this very point, however, Calvin emphasizes dissimilarity between Adam’s relationship to humankind and Christ’s relationship to those who benefit from this gratuitous imputation. He observes:

It may ... be useful to notice here the difference between Christ and Adam, which the apostle omitted.... The [difference] is, that by Adam’s sin we are not condemned through imputation alone, as though we were punished only for the sin of another; but we suffer his punishment, because we also ourselves are guilty; for as our nature is vitiated in him, it is regarded by God as having committed sin. But through the righteousness of Christ *we are restored in a different way* to salvation; for it is not said to be accepted for us, because it is in us, but because we possess Christ himself with all his blessings, as given to us through the bountiful kindness of the Father.... [T]he curse we derive from Adam is conveyed to us by nature, ... but that we may come to a participation of the grace of Christ, we must be ingrafted in him by faith. Hence, in order to partake of the miserable inheritance of sin, it is enough for thee to be man, for it dwells in flesh and blood; but in order to enjoy the righteousness of Christ it is necessary for thee to be a believer.<sup>45</sup>

These words pose, I suggest, a serious obstacle to those who would argue Calvin’s recognition of a representative role performed by Adam from his perception of the Adam-Christ analogy. In the very context of exploring that analogy, Calvin insists that guilt, as an aspect of original sin, belongs to Adam’s descendants because corruption—a vitiated nature—resides in them. Additionally, he unambiguously notes—in the very place where the imputation of righteousness to sinners (and, arguably, Christ’s representation of the same) is indicated—that sinners are “restored in a different way” than they were corrupted in Adam.

*Calvin’s Positive Affirmation of  
Adam’s Representation in the Institutes 2.1.7.*

I begin by repeating the passage from Calvin’s *Institutes* that has secured affirmations of his federalism—whether definitive or incipient in kind—from recent authors:

[T]he beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendants. For the contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him.<sup>46</sup>

It is in the conclusions drawn from this text that one discovers the methodological problem noted in the introduction to this article. These words

---

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, Romans 5:17.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; CO 2:182.

by Calvin have not been considered in relation to those contexts that inform his meaning. As a result, rather hasty determinations of “Calvin’s understanding of the federalist view” and his “federalistic understanding of original sin” have been made on the basis of this passage.<sup>47</sup> Calvin is, in this text, explaining how the transmission of original sin occurs. I suggest, then, two contexts that might serve to illumine his meaning in this passage. First, a dogmatic context—that is, Calvin’s broader teaching on original sin. Particular attention should be given to Calvin’s identification of the gifts and the role that those gifts play in his doctrine of original sin’s substance and transmission. It is these gifts, after all, that Adam is said to have had and then lost “both for himself and for his descendants.” What are these gifts? Can their possession, or their loss, be realized by representation? Second, a historical-theological context—that is, reflection on the problem of original sin’s transmission by theologians in the centuries preceding Calvin. Does Calvin’s teaching mirror or differ from the doctrines of Christian thinkers whom he read and knew? The Christian tradition prior to Calvin, by general acknowledgement, advanced a *realistic* doctrine of original sin. If Calvin articulates a federalistic understanding of original sin with his teaching on original sin’s transmission, the precise points of difference between his doctrine and that of preceding theologians should be discernable. I will consider these contexts, and their import for discerning Calvin’s meaning in the passage in question, in turn.

For Calvin, genuine knowledge of self consists in understanding two things: (1) the “natural excellence” that characterized humankind in creation; and (2) “the miserable condition” that humankind assumed after the Fall.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the “sorry spectacle of our foulness and dishonor” cannot be appreciated until one notes humankind’s “primal worthiness.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, Calvin discusses original sin—the basis of humankind’s “miserable condition”—with one eye glancing backward toward the “excellence” that humankind originally possessed.<sup>50</sup> This procedure, in addition to accentuating the actual foulness humankind currently experiences, preserves God’s integrity as humankind’s creator. “Obviously,” Calvin notes, “man’s ruin is to be ascribed to man alone; for he, having acquired righteousness by God’s kindness, has by his own folly sunk into vanity.”<sup>51</sup>

Humankind’s primal worthiness was realized, of course, in the first man whom God created. Calvin identifies three gradations in Adam’s creation: (1) God formed Adam’s body from “the dust of the earth,” (2) God

---

<sup>47</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, 285.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1; *CO* 2:175–76.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1; *CO* 2:176.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1–3; *CO* 2:175–78.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.10; *CO* 2:184.

endowed Adam's body with a soul, and (3) God engraved his own image upon Adam's soul.<sup>52</sup> By virtue, strictly, of the second gradation, Adam's soul possessed only the lower faculty of imparting vigor and motion to his body. Higher faculties are entrusted to Adam's soul with the third gradation—indeed, higher faculties *constitute* the divine image in Adam.<sup>53</sup> Calvin frequently identifies these higher faculties of the soul as gifts (*dona*) entrusted to Adam.<sup>54</sup> By referring to them as gifts, Calvin highlights the gratuitous and adventitious character of these faculties. Calvin insists, however, that these gifts ultimately constitute “the *perfection of our whole nature*” in its pre-fallen state.<sup>55</sup> These gifts belong, then, to a grace that perfects nature, not to a grace that might be tidily abstracted from, or posed as the antithesis to, the same. Likewise, the advent of these gifts marks the completion of Adam's person, not, properly, an addition to it. Calvin's identification of the gifts themselves should clarify this point: they are “wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice”; or alternatively, “soundness of mind and uprightness of heart”—qualities that establish the integrity of Adam's person.<sup>56</sup>

Humankind's primal worthiness was also *lost* in the first man whom God created. These gifts ought to have generated gratitude toward God, but Adam, “by seeking more than was granted him shamefully spurned God's great bounty, which had been lavished upon him. To have been made in the likeness of God seemed a small matter to a son of earth unless he also attained equality with God—a monstrous wickedness!”<sup>57</sup> Adam's apostasy from his creator entailed forfeiture of those very gifts he had received: “In place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice, with which adornments he had been clad, there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice.”<sup>58</sup> If the gifts constituted the perfection of Adam's nature, these miseries—as Calvin terms them—constitute corruption of the same. Here, Calvin arrives, properly, at the doctrine of original sin, because the nature that Adam corrupted by his transgression is ultimately common to every individual: “Adam, by sinning, not only took upon *himself* misfortune and ruin but also plunged *our nature* into like destruction.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, Genesis 2:7.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, Genesis 2:7, 1:26.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7, 2.2.12; idem, Genesis 3:6; John 3:6.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, Genesis 1:27.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5, 2.2.12; *CO* 2:179, 2:196.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.4; *CO* 2:179.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5; *CO* 2:179.

<sup>59</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6 (emphasis mine); *CO* 2:180.

Calvin appeals to the fathers in designating “this ... inherited corruption”—this “depravation of a nature previously good and pure”—as the very sin intended by the term *peccatum originale*.<sup>60</sup> Pressed to define that term himself, he notes: “Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature.”<sup>61</sup> This depravity follows, as noted, from the loss of those gifts that constituted the perfection of our whole nature in Adam’s person. For Calvin, however, a proper sense of original sin’s power and energy requires language stronger than that of loss or forfeiture: “[O]ur nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle.”<sup>62</sup> The term concupiscence more aptly describes this depravity and corruption of “our nature” than does “lack of original righteousness.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, “the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.”<sup>64</sup> This corrupt nature informs every descendant of Adam and produces actual sins in the same—“just as a burning furnace gives forth flame and sparks.”<sup>65</sup> However, this nature in and of itself—even before it generates concrete acts—is hateful and abhorrent to God. This corrupt nature, in other words, is “rightly considered *sin* in God’s sight.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, it by itself “makes us liable to God’s wrath.”<sup>67</sup>

Having defined original sin, Calvin proceeds to explain how original sin is transmitted from Adam to his descendants. Original sin is a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature—how does this depravity and corruption become the peculiar property of every individual? Calvin resists the tendency to let *this* question precipitate another—that of “whether the son’s soul proceeds by derivation from the father’s soul.”<sup>68</sup> The latter question has, of course, a logical basis in the former. Original sin is, after all, “diffused into all parts of the soul.”<sup>69</sup> The traducian theory of each soul’s origin, coupled with the principle that like begets like, might seem to

---

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5; CO 2:179.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:182.

<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:183.

<sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:183. Here Calvin is, of course, interacting with the various definitions of *peccatum originale* advanced by medieval theologians. For these, see Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 121–26.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:183.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

<sup>67</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:183.

<sup>68</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; CO 2:181.

<sup>69</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8; CO 2:182.

supply in and of itself a sufficient explanation for the transmission of original sin from Adam to his posterity. Calvin, however, rejects this explanation because he rejects the idea of traducianism itself.<sup>70</sup> Admitting that the contagion—that is, the “heredity depravity and corruption” that is original sin—“chiefly lies in [the soul],” Calvin denies that “the contagion [takes] its origin (*habere causam*) from ... [the] soul.”<sup>71</sup>

Calvin offers, then, this explanation for original sin’s transmission: “With this we ought to be content: that the Lord entrusted to Adam those gifts *which he willed to be conferred upon human nature*. Hence Adam, when he lost the gifts received, lost them not only for himself but for us all.”<sup>72</sup> Calvin’s theory pivots, it must be noted from the first, upon the notion of “human nature.” The gifts entrusted to Adam are not, properly, entrusted to his own person, but to the *nature* subsisting in him as an undifferentiated whole in the beginning. True, Calvin sometimes identifies the recipient of the gifts as simply Adam: “Adam ... received for us no less than for himself those gifts which he lost.” He qualifies his own meaning, however, when he immediately adds: “[the gifts] were not given to one man (*unus homo*), but were attributed to human nature as a whole (*sed universae hominis naturae attributa*).”<sup>73</sup> They are, in other words, more accurately considered *dona naturae* than *dona personae*. Precisely for that reason, their loss entails a corruption of *humana natura*, not merely a corruption of Adam’s *persona*. This fundamental point is reiterated by Calvin in the balance of his explanation of original sin’s transmission: “There is nothing absurd, then, in supposing that, when Adam was despoiled, *human nature was left naked and destitute*, or that when he was infected with sin, *contagion crept into human nature*.”<sup>74</sup> Summarizing his explanation for original sin’s transmission, he concludes: “[T]he contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Calvin, John 3:6: “This led many persons to imagine that not only our bodies, but our souls also, descend to us from our parents; for they thought it absurd that original sin, which has its peculiar habitation in the soul, should be conveyed from one man to all his posterity, unless all our souls proceeded from his soul as their source.”

<sup>71</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; *CO* 2:182.

<sup>72</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; *CO* 2:181.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* This constitutes my own translation. Battles’s translation obscures the critical role performed by “human nature as a whole” in Calvin’s theory by translating *universae hominis naturae attributa* as “been assigned to the whole human race”—an unfortunate translation, in my opinion.

<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; *CO* 2:181 (emphasis mine).

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.7; *CO* 2:182. Calvin communicates this idea in his biblical commentaries as well. See especially his comments on Genesis 3:6 and John 3:6.

Here, we arrive at those words that have underpinned recent affirmations of Calvin's representative perspective. Do these words express a notion of Adamic representation? Clearly, Calvin communicates with these words and with his doctrine more broadly a concept of humankind's solidarity with Adam in his sin and its consequences: Adam's loss is equally humankind's loss, but it does not appear that *representation* provides the rationale for that solidarity. As is evident from Calvin's broader explanation of original sin's transmission, *human nature* provides the rationale for humankind's solidarity with Adam. Humankind as a whole forfeited the gifts when Adam sinned, *not* because Adam acted in a representative capacity, but because God actually "took away from human nature what he had bestowed upon it." Human nature as a whole was, according to Calvin's doctrine, present *in* Adam when he sinned: "[God] adorned *the whole nature of mankind* with most excellent endowments in one man, so in the same man he again denuded it."<sup>76</sup> That which is actually *there* in the moment of Adam's sin and consequent corruption cannot, of course, be *represented* in the same moment. Granted, every individual in his or her particularity was not present in Adam when he sinned. However, the human nature that ultimately informs every particular person was there, and the corruption that is original sin resides in that human nature. Calvin's commentary on John 3:6 should be noted here, because it expresses the very idea found in the *Institutes* with, perhaps, greater precision: "[T]he corruption of all mankind in the person of Adam ... [proceeded] from the appointment of God, who in one man had adorned us all, and who has in him also deprived us of his gifts. Instead of saying, therefore, that each of us draws vice and corruption from his parents, it would be more correct to say that we are all alike corrupted in Adam alone, because immediately after his revolt God took away from human nature what He had bestowed upon it."<sup>77</sup> Humankind's corruption, Calvin notes, occurred in Adam—not, however, in Adam insofar as he represented his descendants, but in Adam insofar as after his revolt God took away from human nature what he had bestowed upon it.

It is unclear, in fact, what idea would actually be communicated by the notion of Adam's representation in *this* context. According to Lillback, "Adam as 'ordained by God' lost for 'himself and for his descendants' *the divine gifts* belonging to the human race as their legal representative."<sup>78</sup> As has been noted above, however, those divine gifts, in Calvin's understanding, constitute human nature's *perfection* as well as (in their loss) human nature's *corruption*. To cast Adam as humankind's legal representative specifically in his forfeiture of the divine gifts would imply that Adam became

---

<sup>76</sup> Calvin, Genesis 3:6.

<sup>77</sup> Calvin, John 3:6.

<sup>78</sup> Emphasis mine.

*representatively* corrupt. This would further imply that humankind still possesses the divine gifts in reality. To impose a representative structure on Calvin's words in this statement could ultimately render Calvin an advocate of the Pelagianism he so strongly despises. For Calvin, depravity and corruption are realized in every human person, not in an isolated legal representative.

Further to this latter point, it should be recalled that later Reformed theologians specifically premised humankind's *guilt* for Adam's sin upon the representative bond between Adam and his posterity. Humankind's participation in Adam's own *corruption* found a sufficient theoretical basis in the natural bond indicated, for example, by Turretin (as noted in the introduction). The authors who argue Calvin's representative perspective from this particular text in the *Institutes* intend, of course, to align Calvin's doctrine more closely with that of later Reformed thinkers. However, in suggesting a representative role performed by Adam with regard to his loss of the divine gifts—that is, with regard to actual depravity and corruption—they have posited a radical difference between Calvin and his theological successors. Later Reformed theologians never, of course, suggested that the experience of depravity was restricted to a representative for humankind. Later Reformed theologians restricted Adam's representative role to his obedience or disobedience in relation to God's command; they never suggested that Adam lost the qualities that constituted human nature upright as a representative.

Considered within its dogmatic context, this passage from Calvin's *Institutes* fails to sustain the arguments for Calvin's representative perspective that have been based upon it. Calvin articulates his doctrine of a *radical* relationship between Adam and humankind with the very words that have been identified as evidence of his *representative* perspective. He insists that Adam was the "root (*radix*) of human nature."<sup>79</sup> God entrusted certain gifts to human nature as a whole as it existed in Adam. Human nature was stripped of those gifts when Adam sinned. Considering Calvin's doctrine against the backdrop of Christian reflection on original sin in the centuries preceding him should serve, furthermore, to demonstrate the continuity between Calvin's doctrine and pre-Reformation (realistic) thought.

I note in particular the doctrines of Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas. According to George Park Fisher, "Augustine's theory [of original sin] rests on the idea that human nature as a whole was deposited in the first man. This nature, as it came from the hands of God, was pure.... But human nature, existing in its totality in Adam, was corrupted in the first act of transgression, and as such is transmitted to his descendants. The instrument of this transmission is

---

<sup>79</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6; *CO* 2:180.

the sexual appetite.”<sup>80</sup> Numerous citations from Augustine support Fisher’s analysis. In *City of God*, Augustine notes: “In the first man, therefore, *there existed the whole human nature*, which was to be transmitted by the woman to posterity.... [W]hat man was made, not when created, but when he sinned and was punished, this he propagated.”<sup>81</sup> Again, more fully:

For God, the author of natures, not of vices, created man upright; but man, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned, begot corrupted and condemned children. For we all were in that one man, since we all were that one man, who fell into sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin. *For not yet was the particular form created and distributed to us, in which we as individuals were to live, but already the seminal nature was there from which we were to be propagated; and this being vitiated by sin, and bound by the chain of death, and justly condemned, man could not be born of man in any other state.* And thus, from the bad use of free will, there originated the whole train of evil, which, with its concatenation of miseries, conveys the human race from its depraved origin, *as from a corrupt root (radix corrupta)*, on to the destruction of the second death, which has no end, those only being excepted who are freed by the grace of God.<sup>82</sup>

Augustine’s doctrine of humankind’s solidarity with Adam—we all were that one man—cannot, then, be reduced to a crude notion of every individual’s physiological presence in Adam.<sup>83</sup> Augustine clearly insists that “the particular form ... in which we as individuals were to live” was “not yet ... distributed to us” when Adam sinned. Rather, human nature—“the seminal nature ... from which we were to be propagated”—was present as a whole in Adam. That nature, corrupted (or vitiated) and condemned in Adam’s sin, subsequently informs every particular person. This sufficiently explains, for Augustine, every individual’s participation in original sin.

Fisher’s description of Augustine’s doctrine requires only one explanatory footnote: Sexual appetite functions as the instrument of corrupt human nature’s transmission *insofar* as that appetite finds fulfilment in actual generation. From the *City of God* once more: “[H]uman nature was in [Adam’s] person vitiated and altered to such an extent, that he suffered in his members the warring of disobedient lust, and became subject to the necessity of dying. And what he himself had become by sin and punishment, such he generated those whom he begot; that is to say, subject to sin and death.”<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Fisher, “Theories,” 472.

<sup>81</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 13.3; *NPNF1-02:246* (emphasis mine).

<sup>82</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 13.14; *NPNF1-02:251* (emphasis mine).

<sup>83</sup> As is at least partially done, for example, by N. P. Williams in *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1927), 372.

<sup>84</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 13.3; *NPNF1-02:246*.

Augustine's explanation for original sin's transmission was adopted, largely without qualification, by medieval Christian thinkers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. In *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, Anselm notes: "Adam and Eve ... committed personal sin, and so ... their whole being was now weakened and corrupted. Their bodies after their sin became like those of brute beasts, subject to corruption and carnal appetites, and their souls, ruled by this bodily corruption and these appetites, and deprived of the gifts they had lost, were themselves infected with carnal appetites."<sup>85</sup> This corruption of body and soul was not, however, peculiar to Adam and Eve. Anselm continues: "And because the whole of human nature was contained in Adam and Eve, and nothing of it existed outside them, the whole of human nature was weakened and corrupted."<sup>86</sup> The human nature thus weakened and corrupted in Adam subsequently informs particular persons, thereby involving them in the bodily corruption and carnal appetites experienced by Adam and Eve. Again following Augustine, Anselm perceives physical generation as the instrument of human nature's transmission: "If human nature had not sinned, it would have been propagated as God had made it: thus after its sin it is propagated according to what it has made itself by sinning."<sup>87</sup>

One particular aspect of Anselm's explanation for original sin's transmission must be emphasized. Indicating the corruption of Adam and Eve—and in them "the whole of human nature"—that followed from their sin, Anselm notes *their* (and therefore *human nature's*) loss of gifts. Adam and Eve's deprivation of the gifts is tantamount, in fact, to their corruption. The deprivation of gifts, in other words, *constitutes* the corruption of that nature that ultimately informs every particular person. Anselm develops this idea subsequently in the same work: "[Adam] willfully abandoned *the gifts which he had been given to keep for himself and his offspring*: thus his children lost what their father, when he was able to give it to them by keeping it, took away by not keeping it."<sup>88</sup>

For Anselm, chief among these gifts is original justice that established human nature's integrity in its pre-fallen state. He summarizes his doctrine of original sin's transmission, then, indicating justice more properly as the substance of what Adam had been given and lost both for himself and his offspring:

---

<sup>85</sup> Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, ¶ 2. Citations are taken from Saint Anselm, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>86</sup> Anselm, *Virgin Conception*, ¶ 2. Anselm's inclusion of Eve with Adam as the locality, so to speak, of the whole of human nature is noteworthy. This is, however, not the place to explore the implications of that inclusion.

<sup>87</sup> Anselm, *Virgin Conception*, ¶ 2.

<sup>88</sup> Anselm, *Virgin Conception*, ¶ 23 (emphasis mine).

[Adam's] person made the nature sinful... . [I]n Adam, outside whom there was nothing of human nature, human nature was stripped of the justice that it had, and continues to lack [that justice] unless it is aided. By this argument since nature subsists in persons, and there are no persons without nature, nature makes the persons of infants sinful. Thus the sin of Adam is transmitted personally in all those who are by nature propagated from him, and is in them original, or natural.<sup>89</sup>

Thomas Aquinas begins his treatment of original sin's transmission by rejecting any explanation grounded on a traducian theory of the soul's origin.<sup>90</sup> "[S]ome," he notes, "considering that the subject of sin is the rational soul, maintained that the rational soul is transmitted with the semen, so that thus an infected soul would seem to produce other infected souls."<sup>91</sup> Thomas, however, envisions another solution to the dilemma of original sin's transmission: "[W]e must explain the matter otherwise by saying that all men born of Adam may be considered as one man, inasmuch as *they have one common nature*, which they receive from their first parents.... [So original sin is not the sin of this person, except inasmuch as this person receives his nature from his first parent."<sup>92</sup> For Thomas, too, original sin's transmission discovers its rationale in humankind's solidarity with Adam when he sinned. That solidarity is grounded upon a common nature that, corrupted in Adam, informs every particular person descending from Adam, and physical generation serves as the instrument of human nature's transmission. Denying that original sin is, properly speaking, transmitted by human semen, he acknowledges nevertheless that "semen by its own power transmits *the human nature* from parent to child, and with that nature, the stain which infects it."<sup>93</sup>

Thomas, like Anselm, appeals to the concept of gifts entrusted to Adam—gifts that constituted both the integrity of the common nature in Adam and (in their loss) its corruption—to provide further clarity to the dynamic of original sin's transmission. Just as a sin of nature (*peccatum naturae*) can be distinguished from personal sin (*peccatum personae*)—the former category comprising Adam's initial transgression inasmuch as that transgression corrupted human nature as a whole—so also some gifts belong "to the person as such" and others "to the nature as such."<sup>94</sup> Thus, Thomas explains: "[O]riginal justice ... was a gift of grace, conferred by God on all human nature in our first parent. This gift the first man lost by

<sup>89</sup> Anselm, *Virgin Conception*, ¶ 23.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1–2.81.1.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas, *ST*, 1–2.81.1.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas, *ST*, 1–2.81.1 (emphasis mine).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Thomas, *ST*, 1–2.81.2.

his first sin. Wherefore as that original justice together with the nature was to have been transmitted to his posterity, so also was its disorder."<sup>95</sup>

Calvin's own perspective on original sin's transmission—and specifically that passage that has underpinned affirmations of Calvin's representative perspective—can finally be considered against the backdrop of traditional Christian thought on the same doctrine. It should be apparent from the preceding survey that Calvin did not articulate novel ideas regarding original sin's transmission. Calvin's thought perfectly reflects the *ideas* and *expressions* of Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas with regard to that doctrine. For Calvin, like his predecessors, original sin's transmission can be explained by the logic of a human nature that existed as a whole in Adam. That nature was corrupted when Adam sinned. Transmitted by physical generation, that nature informs every particular descendant of Adam. Thus, every person participates in original sin.

The particular expression from Calvin's *Institutes* that has generated argument for Calvin's federalism is, like the broader theory that it summarizes, entirely *typical* in its articulation of a radical relationship between Adam and humankind and that relationship serves as the ground of the latter's participation in original sin. Calvin's words, in fact, find exact equivalents in the realist Christian tradition on which he apparently draws. For Calvin, the contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul. For Thomas, these explanations—explanations that resort to a traducian theory of the soul's origin or reduce original sin to a sexually transmitted virus—are insufficient. For Calvin, it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, *both for himself and for his descendants*, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him. For Anselm, Adam willfully abandoned the gifts that he had been given to keep *for himself and his offspring*. The gifts referenced by Calvin in his explanation were, according to him, entrusted to Adam inasmuch as the Lord willed [them] to be conferred upon human nature. For Thomas, original justice was a gift of grace, conferred by God on all human nature in our first parent.

Calvin's thought, then, cannot, on the basis of this text from the *Institutes*, be identified as any form of federalism without projecting federalism onto the entire realistic tradition that he so closely mirrors in his doctrine. To project federalism onto the entire tradition would, of course, obliterate the real differences that exist between pre-Reformation (realistic) and post-Reformation (federal) theories of original sin's transmission. This tendency must, for the sake of historical integrity, be avoided. Later Reformed theology's notion of a representative relationship between Adam and humankind *is* unique in relation to pre-Reformation thought. Given the continuity of Calvin's thought with those *pre*-Reformation thinkers (as

---

<sup>95</sup>Thomas, *ST*, 1–2.81.2.

just noted), I would add: Later Reformed theology's notion of Adam's representative relationship to humankind is unique in relation to Calvin's own thought.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I repeat the arguments that have been made for Calvin's recognition of Adam's representation and summarize my critique of each. It has been argued that Calvin simply failed to express his understanding of Adam's representation because his Catholic opponents—namely Albert Pighius and Ambrosius Catharinus—reduced original sin to nothing more than Adam's initial transgression imputed to his posterity. A comparison of Calvin's doctrine in 1539 with his doctrine in 1559, however, demonstrates complete consistency in his thought and expression. Calvin had no knowledge of Pighius's or Catharinus's doctrines in 1539. There is no ground, then, for claiming any influence of these contemporary Catholic theologians on Calvin's teaching.

It has been argued that Calvin's recognition of Adam's representation is implied by his understanding of the Adam-Christ analogy. Calvin does, to be sure, draw attention to the biblical analogy between Adam and Christ in his treatment of original sin. When he does so, however, he draws a positive comparison between Adam and Christ in terms of their *influence*—via communication or transfusion—on human persons, not their supposed representative roles. Adam's negative influence upon humankind finds a positive corollary in Christ's restorative, *sanctifying* influence upon believers. When Calvin does develop the doctrine of Christ's imputed righteousness in relation to Adam's role in human history (as in Romans 5:12–19), he stresses dissimilarity between the way in which Adam's sin becomes his descendants and the way in which Christ's righteousness becomes believers. Sin is *transmitted* by participation in the human nature that Adam corrupted in the Fall; righteousness is freely *imputed* to those who believe. No doctrine of Adam's representation can be discovered in Calvin's thought on the basis of his comments regarding the Adam-Christ analogy.

It has been argued that Calvin affirms Adam's representation when he teaches, in the *Institutes* 2.1.7 that Adam received and then forfeited certain gifts “for himself and for his descendants.” Attention to the dogmatic context of Calvin's words and the doctrine of original sin's transmission as it was developed in the centuries preceding Calvin demonstrates that Calvin was not suggesting any notion of Adamic representation with these words. He taught, in harmony with Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas, that God had perfected human nature in Adam by certain gifts and that human nature was deprived of those gifts and thereby corrupted when Adam sinned. Descendants of Adam participate in original sin by virtue of their share in the corrupt human nature that is transmitted to them by physical

generation. No representation of Adam is envisioned by Calvin when he speaks of Adam's sin and the forfeiture of the gifts that sin entailed for human nature *in toto*. Calvin's doctrine of original sin's transmission perfectly reflects the understanding and teaching of the pre-Reformation realist tradition.

Calvin's theological heirs did, however, articulate a notion of Adamic representation. As I have argued and, I hope, demonstrated, proper understanding of Calvin's thought does not *begin* with comparisons of his thought to that of later individuals and/or movements. Such comparisons are not, however, for that reason illegitimate—indeed, such comparisons mark the beginning of a genuine appreciation for, and understanding of, the ideas of those *later* individuals and/or movements. Thus, one final comment on the relationship between Calvin's thought and that of later Reformed thinkers is appropriate—especially because it is the relationship between Calvin and Calvinism that has generated recent interest in Calvin's own understanding of Adam's relationship with humankind.

The doctrine of a twofold bond between Adam and humankind—one part radical and one part representative—does not, in my judgment, deny or contradict Calvin's notion of Adam's radical relationship with humankind. It assumes (or at least permits) the substance of Calvin's idea but adds something further to it—the notion of a representative role performed by Adam when he first sinned. This addition constitutes a *substantive*—not just *terminological*—point of *difference* with Calvin's understanding. Is this difference significant? Perhaps not, according to Carl Trueman.<sup>96</sup> Regarding historical perspectives on the theological relationship between Calvin and later Reformed thought, Trueman notes: “[W]e need to move beyond the language of *identity* and *difference*, and even, perhaps, to be careful in the use of that of *continuity* and *discontinuity*—though the latter, when understood in the correct way, is not objectionable. A better approach to the question is to use the category of *development*.”<sup>97</sup> I agree in principle with Trueman's preference for the category of *development*. I would suggest, however, that determinations of identity and difference actually aid the process of discovering where and why development has occurred. Questions of dogmatic identity and difference need not, as Trueman fears, obscure careful attention to a historical process of development that involves factors “other than ... those which are purely dogmatic.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, identifications of theological *difference*, in particular, might provide the impetus for determining those other factors.

---

<sup>96</sup> Carl Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225–44.

<sup>97</sup> Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism,” 226.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

This, I hope, might be the case with the point of difference between Calvin and his theological successors as identified above. The authors engaged in this article have, I suggest, failed to recognize the difference between Calvin's teaching and later Reformed dogma. They have, indeed, read Calvin through a lens provided by later dogmatic ideas, and thereby distorted his teaching. I have attempted, in response, to deconstruct the imposition of more developed Reformed theological categories upon Calvin's thought. This, in addition to clarifying Calvin's own doctrine, should permit further, critical reflection upon those factors (both theological and otherwise) that actually contributed to the unique *development* in Reformed theology of a doctrine of Adam's representative relationship with humanity.