

THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE IN CALVIN AND TURRETIN: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

TIM PRUSSIC¹

Before I even thought about matriculating at Western Reformed Seminary, I had great interest in the art and science of the interpretation of Scripture, or hermeneutics. One's hermeneutics, I came to find, to a great degree depends on one's view of Scripture: its inspiration, integrity, inerrancy, unity, etc. Thus, fresh out of college, I began to search for books on the inspiration of Scripture. I happened upon a then twenty-year-old book which appeared to be of great promise and seemed right up my alley: *The Authority and Inspiration of Scripture: An Historical Approach* by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim.² The major thrust of this book (which has since been called the "Rogers/McKim Proposal") is that, throughout history theologians have viewed inspiration with a tendency either toward what they call "formal" inspiration or "functional" inspiration. By formal inspiration, they mean that *the text* of the Bible itself is inspired by God, and by functional inspiration, they mean that the Holy Spirit *uses* the authoritative text of the Bible to work in the lives of people.³ In other words, Rogers and McKim locate formal inspiration in the text itself, while functional inspiration is the Spirit's application of that text to people. They offer these two views of inspiration as very close to mutually exclusive; they group theologians on either one or the other side of their formal/functional dichotomy. In the course of the book, they included Calvin in the group promoting a functional inspiration and the Reformed Orthodox (and Turretin specifically) in the group espousing a formal inspiration. Having read Rogers and McKim thoroughly, and trusting that their historical research was correct, I struggled deeply with the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy for a handful of years – even into seminary.⁴

The Rogers/McKim Proposal was one more book in a long line of scholarship pitting Calvin against his later followers. Further, the Proposal did it on the sacred ground of the inspiration of Scripture. A distorted view of Scripture has devastating effects on one's theology, as Scripture is the fountainhead of theology.

¹ Tim Prussic is a graduate of Western Reformed Seminary and is licensed to preach by the Northwest Presbytery of the Bible Presbyterian Church.

² Jack Bartlett Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

³ I found, after I read their book and did my own research, that their formal/functional distinction, while useful, can be turned into a false dichotomy and used to attack the inspiration of the written word of God, the Bible. In my view, both Rogers and McKim are more influenced by Karl Barth's view of inspiration than John Calvin's.

⁴ It is quite important which books we read, especially when we lack discernment. Let this be a lesson to catechize our children well, for falsities, once latched onto mentally, are very difficult to supplant. Happily, the truth operates the same way.

Intrigued with the Rogers/McKim Proposal, I decided to put it to the test by comparing the doctrine of Scripture in John Calvin and Francis Turretin.⁵ What follows in this article is a bit of the fruit of my research into the doctrine of Scripture in two of the greatest theologians in the Reformed tradition, John Calvin and Francis Turretin. I'll examine first the form of their writing and then the content of their doctrine.

A mere comparison of the respective tables of contents of Calvin's and Turretin's *Institutes* immediately reveals the fact that these two great theologians arranged their work in substantially different ways. Calvin organized his *Institutes* after a soteriological model beginning with human knowledge of God as Creator, moving into the knowledge of God as Redeemer, the means and benefits of Christ's grace, and finally into the external means of grace. Turretin, however, ordered his work after a more focused, analytical model. He separated out discussion into fairly self-contained sections (called *loci*, or places), similar to the way the Westminster divines ordered the chapters of the Confession. The major source of this organization difference was rooted in historical context. Calvin was a second-generation Reformer and the first great systematizer of Reformed Protestantism. In Calvin's day, the Reformation was moving across much of Europe like a raging fire, but it was not yet a mature theological movement. Calvin's *Institutes* reflect both the power and organizational immaturity of his age. Turretin, by contrast, was a Reformed scholastic, or schoolman. Reformed scholasticism (sometimes called Reformed orthodoxy) developed as the Reformation advanced and took ground. Once Reformed schools were established, teachers began to ponder how best to teach theology in an academic or scholastic context. They drew heavily on the medieval scholastics (Duns Scotus, Bonaventure, Aquinas, etc.) to aid them in the form of presentation, while they drew heavily on the Bible through the Reformers, medieval scholastics, and church fathers for the content of that teaching.⁶ The difference in organization, therefore, does not necessarily reflect a difference in the content of teaching.

As one moves past the differing modes of organization to the content of their teaching, one is deeply impressed, not with the differences in teaching, but with the similarities. Broadly, both theologians understood revelation as falling into two distinct but related categories: natural and special. They both affirmed that God is clearly revealed through nature as Creator and Sustainer of the world (this is sometimes called "general" revelation). There is no lack of clarity in the revelation, but sinners confuse God's clearly-revealed truth. Thus, sinners hold distorted notions of God—not because natural revelation is faulty, but because of their own sin and rebellion. Further, Turretin agreed with Calvin that the revelation of salvation from sin was revealed only through special revelation.⁷

⁵ Not only was Turretin specifically singled out by Rogers and McKim, but he's also the most logical choice for my comparison to Calvin as 1) he is highly regarded among the Reformed orthodox, 2) he was both pastor and professor in Geneva, just like Calvin, and 3) he was massively influential upon later Reformed thinkers, including Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge. Hodge actually used Turretin's *Institutes* as the systematic theology at Princeton Seminary until he published his own great *Systematic Theology*.

⁶ Some historians have called this the "double continuity" of Reformed orthodoxy, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:28-29.

⁷ For a detailed account of what's called the duplex cognitio Dei, or the double knowledge of God, see Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford

Neither Calvin nor Turretin limited special revelation to Scripture alone. They affirmed that God had, throughout history, revealed himself in various ways throughout the ages of the church. The fullest revelation made to the church is God's written word. Regarding the Scripture in this present age of the church, both men stressed that, while God certainly had the power to reveal himself in other ways, the written word of Scripture is given to the church, beyond which we ought not seek revelation. In the pithy words of Turretin, "God is not bound to the Scripture, but has bound us to it" (Turr. *Inst.* II. ii. 2). Calvin, in obvious agreement, railed against the Anabaptists for separating the work of the Spirit from the written word of God, in which, alone, we recognize the Spirit.

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word. (Calv. *Inst.* I. ix. 3)

God's word, the Bible, is the last word for the church and is tied closely to the Spirit of God. According to Calvin and Turretin, God has bound us by his Spirit to the Scripture.

The authority of Scripture can be considered both objectively and subjectively (i.e., what the Scripture is of itself and what it is to a particular person). In the objective consideration, we detect no difference between Calvin and Turretin. Simply, if God spoke the Scripture, it bears his authority, which is infinite. Turretin, for example, reasoned thus: "The question of the authority of Scripture depends upon its origin... since it is from God, it cannot be other than genuine (*authenticus*) and divine" (Turr. *Inst.* II. iv. 1).

Under the consideration of the subjective authority of Scripture, we come to a significant discontinuity between Calvin and Turretin. This discontinuity is centered in the question of *how* the text of Scripture comes to be understood as divine and authoritative by a person. Calvin taught that when the Holy Spirit convinces a person of the divinity of the Scripture, he does so through the Scripture itself apart from the external *indicia* (indications or marks) of its divinity. The Westminster Confession offers a helpful list of these marks:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And *the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine*

authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.⁸

The *indicia* are helpful in preparation for belief in the Scripture, as they brush aside unnecessary obstacles, and they can strengthen and buttress faith, but they are preparatory and ancillary. Turretin, by contrast, saw the Spirit convincing the person of the authority of Scripture *through* the marks themselves.⁹ He made it clear that faith is “formed” on the rational basis of the “sure marks”:

Although faith rests on the authority of [divine] testimony, and not on scientific demonstration, it does not follow that it cannot be supported by intellectual arguments at times, especially when faith is first formed, because faith, before it believes, should (*debere*) have the clearly perceived divine quality of the witness whom it should believe, [known] from the sure marks found in [the witness]; otherwise it cannot believe him. For where such grounds for believing anyone are lacking, the testimony of such a witness is not worthy of belief. (Turr. *Inst.* II. iv. 13)

Turretin stressed that faith has a rational grounding. One comes to believe in the divinity of Scripture on a rational basis. Consequently, he conceived of the Spirit using the marks of the Scripture to create a rational case on the strength of which the Spirit convinced the person of the divine nature of the Scriptures. Calvin, however, considered the process of coming to faith no less rationally, but with a less rationalistic flavor. Calvin simply argued that, external rational grounds (marks) aside, nothing could be more rational than what God the Spirit says. For Calvin, the same Spirit speaking in the Word is working inside the person under the ministry of the Word convincing them of the divinity of that Word. This, I think, constitutes the greatest discontinuity between Calvin and Turretin and reveals the incipient rationalism of Turretin’s day, which came to full blossom in the Enlightenment and, in Geneva, in the person of Turretin’s son, Jean-Alphonse Turretin.¹⁰

As regards the inspiration of Scripture, both Calvin and Turretin offer us essentially the same doctrine, but Turretin’s teaching is, as should be expected, more refined with increased clarity and precision. Both men saw the Scripture as a divine-human document, the very words of God through the ministry of men. Calvin, for example, often spoke of the Scriptures as being *os dei*, or from the mouth of God. He taught that “the Scripture is from God. . . . It has flowed to us from the very mouth of God” (Calv. *Inst.* I. vii. 5). The Bible is a divine document but is also conditioned by human and historical influences. “That the sacred writers responded,” notes Turretin, “to circumstances of time and place is unquestioned” (Turr. *Inst.* II. iii. 2). Divine inspiration, according to these two theologians, does not circumvent human agency, but makes

⁸ WCF 1:5, emphasis mine.

⁹ The current author is in disagreement with the great B. B. Warfield on this point. Warfield sees Calvin’s doctrine of the Spirit’s use of the *indicia* much along the same lines as Turretin’s teaching. In that case, there would be no discontinuity, but the present author thinks that Warfield’s view of Calvin was influenced by Turretin.

¹⁰ See James T. Dennison, “The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. by Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 1999), 242-255; also, see Martin I. Klauber and Glenn S. Sunshine, “Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 25/1 (1990): 7-27.

use of human writers, time, and place. Neither doubts that divine inspiration extends to the very words of the Scripture. Calvin asserts that “the word of God is not distinguished from the *words* of the Prophet.”¹¹ Again: “Every word which may have issued forth from God is to be received with implicit authority.”¹² While humans wrote the Bible, divine inspiration extends right down to the very words themselves.

Similar to verbal inspiration, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is one that is hotly contested with regard to Calvin, but none dare misconstrue Turretin’s view, as he states his position with customary force and precision. “The question is whether in writing they [the human authors of Scripture] were so led and inspired by the Holy Spirit that, with regard to both substance and the words, their writings were authoritative and divine. The adversaries deny this; we affirm it” (Turr. *Inst.* II. iv. 5). Did Calvin, however, understand the Bible to have errors or to be error free? Two examples will suffice to show that Calvin did not doubt the factual and historical data contained in the Scriptures. Even in Calvin’s day, some scholars questioned the historicity of the person of Job. Did a man named Job *really* exist? In his sermon on Job 1:1, Calvin argued that, based on what the text says, he surely did.

Yet we ought not to doubt that this man, whose country is here noted, whose name is expressed, really was, that he lived, and that the things which are here written have happened to him.... For we have already the testimony of Ezekiel, and that of Saint James, who well show that Job truly was, and also when [the sacred] history declares it, we cannot erase what the Holy Spirit so notably wished to say.¹³

Secondly, since Jerome some Christian scholars had doubted that Peter authored the second epistle bearing his name. Like other scholars, Calvin noted the difference in literary style between First and Second Peter and had sufficient external reason to question the authorship of Second Peter. Calvin, even in light of those reasons, still appealed to the text to find the answer to the question of authorship. He reasoned, “If it be received as canonical, we must allow Peter to be the author, since it has his name inscribed.”¹⁴ For Calvin, the words of Scripture have more authority than the historical conjectures of scholars, even when those conjectures are plausible and weighty. More succinctly, for Calvin, if it is written in the Book, it is true. The Bible, being God’s own word, from his very mouth, cannot err.

The notion of divine accommodation in Scripture is an interesting and clear example of how Calvin-Versus-Calvinism scholarship, like that of Rogers and McKim, has distorted the teaching of Reformed orthodoxy. Calvin’s notion of accommodation was that God’s speech to humanity in the Bible was accommodated to the capacity of the recipient, that is, finite humans.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (22 vols.; Repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 15:341 (Haggai 1:12), emphasis mine. Also, see his commentary on Gal. 3:16 (21:94-96), and Matt. 5:18 (16:278).

¹² *Ibid.*, 5:429 (Psalm 62:12). I quote Calvin and not Turretin on this topic, as Turretin’s doctrine of verbal inspiration is uncontested, while numerous scholars argue that Turretin diverged from Calvin on this issue. For further evidence and the views of various scholars, see Roger Nicole, “John Calvin and Inerrancy” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/4 (1982): 425-442.

¹³ John Calvin, *Sermons from Job* (Repr., Ed. and trans. Leroy Nixon; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 8.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 22:363 (The Argument of the Second Epistle of Peter).

Calvin famously referred to the Scripture as God “lispering” and making “baby talk” or “prattle.”¹⁵ The point of this is not that God has a speech impediment, but that humanity has a hearing impediment. Calvin’s wonderful image is as if God, in speaking to his people in the Scripture, is holding a tiny infant in his arms. So great is God’s care to communicate, that he articulates his love, as it were, through cooing to his infant, simply so that the infant can understand.

From the Reformation and from Calvin’s time, the Reformed orthodox tightened up their theological articulations and reworked the form by which they expressed their theological ideas. In so doing, did they lose track of Calvin’s notion of accommodation? Rogers and McKim answer in the affirmative. They assert that Turretin entirely abandoned Calvin’s notion of accommodation.

The concept of accommodation utilized by the early church fathers and by Calvin was *entirely absent* from Turretin. Calvin viewed the language and thought forms of the biblical writers as human products that God had graciously condescended to use. Turretin, by contrast, treated the language and thought forms of the Bible as supernatural entities dictated directly by God.¹⁶

Rogers and McKim would have us believe that, to Turretin, divine revelation was not adapted to human capacity, but was somehow divinely inspired to the point where it is a direct product of God’s mind that bypasses human language and thought forms. A simple reading of the first two chapters of Turretin’s *Institutes* would have saved them from their error in judgment.

Turretin’s view of accommodation is not as beautiful and metaphorical as is Calvin’s, but one really would not expect that from Turretin. There are three ways in which Turretin clearly articulates his notion of accommodation. The first is Turretin’s most basic distinction in his concept of theology. He distinguished between what he called archetypal theology (God’s knowledge of himself) and ectypal theology (the knowledge of God available to a created being). Simply stated, the knowledge of God a creature can have is quite distinct from God’s self-knowledge. The object of the knowledge (God) is the same in both, but these two types of knowledge differ both in type and degree. Secondly, Turretin found divine accommodation in the progressive revelation and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Divine revelation was tailored to the time and place it was given; God revealed himself not all at once, but in stages or progressively. Finally, divine revelation, even in its fullest written form, the Scripture, is still suited by God to the recipients and in a form that is most conducive to the ends for which he gave it. Richard Muller, quoting Turretin himself, notes that in Scripture, “God speaks ‘not to himself’ but ‘to us,’ which is to say – clearly echoing Calvin – ‘*accommodate ad captum nostrum, qui finites est,*’ ‘accommodated to our capacity, which is finite.’”¹⁷ Divine

¹⁵ See, for example, Calvin’s *Institutes*, I. xiii. 1.

¹⁶ Rogers and McKim, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 177; emphasis mine. All three assertions in this quotation are highly suspect, and the first palpably false. Again, Rogers and McKim boldly assert, “No trace of Calvin’s concept of accommodation was to be found in Turretin’s work,” *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 188.

¹⁷ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:305. Also, see Martin I. Klauber, “Francis Turretin on Biblical Accommodation: Loyal Calvinist or Reformed Scholastic?” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 55/1 (1993): 73-86.

revelation not accommodated to finite creatures, for Turretin, is asinine, and strikes at the very heart of his theological concept.

One expects to find some variations and divergences in any particular doctrine held by two different theologians, even theologians within the same theological tradition. We should expect them to differ more and more as the theologians were separated by time. In the case of our two theologians, Turretin flourished about 120 years after Calvin, and lived in an intellectual climate quite different from the great Reformer. All the contextual and historical differences notwithstanding, we find a remarkable resemblance between the teaching regarding Scripture in Calvin and Turretin. There are differences, no doubt, but Turretin offers a fairly accurate scholastic repackaging of Calvin's doctrine.

As for my personal journey, I learned to approach scholarship, even erudite scholarship, with a healthy grain of salt. At the end of the day, the Rogers/McKim Proposal is found wanting. That fact, however, did not stop it from influencing thousands of aspiring and established historians and theologians. Let us be diligent in the defense of our theological heritage, in the first place, simply by becoming familiar with it. For, were we to rely on the scholarship of Rogers and McKim, we would have mistakenly written off Turretin as a rationalist, and rejected his doctrine of Scripture as a significant departure from Calvin's doctrine.