

THEOLOGICAL SPECTACLES AND  
A PARADIGM OF CENTRALITY:  
A REPLY TO MARCUS JOHNSON

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I am grateful for the time, effort, and charity that Marcus Johnson has put forth in responding to my article. In doing so he has demonstrated aspects of my thesis that could benefit from some clarification and has given a voice to some helpful questions which typically arise in this discussion. I appreciate his fairness and his desire to assess many of the pertinent issues involved in order to avoid arriving at hasty conclusions. Having said this, however, I believe that he has misunderstood several aspects of my article, namely, the thrust of my thesis and its implications. Though he raises some true and helpful points, I believe that many of them refute an argument that I do not make and in some instances address wholly different issues. At the root of the misunderstanding, I believe, is a difficulty to relinquish an interpretive paradigm which relies on discovering architectonic principles and central motifs in both Calvin and in his interpreters. To a degree, I believe, this is caused by some blurring of the methodological distinctions between historical and systematic theology.

Johnson levels the following criticisms: my argument downplays the importance of union with Christ in Calvin; it seeks to establish forensic justification rather than union with Christ as central to Calvin's soteriology; it precludes justification and sanctification from being gifts simultaneously bestowed in Christ by imposing a cause and effect relationship between the two gifts; it mistakenly equates "controlling principles" with central dogmas; it prohibits Calvin from discussing soteriological order in the *Institutes*, Book 3; and, finally, it errs in describing this view as a "new perspective." In addressing these concerns, I will explain the sources of misunderstanding, clarify my general thesis, and deal with several of Johnson's individual arguments.

I. THE SOURCES OF MISUNDERSTANDING:  
HISTORICAL VS. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY  
AND A PARADIGM OF CENTRALITY

Richard Muller's assessment of much of recent Calvin scholarship deserves serious, self-critical attention from all who would study the Reformer:

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“Calvin’s thought has been avidly deconstructed by” those “in search of a theological or religious ally or, occasionally, in search of a historical source for the theological trials of the present.”<sup>1</sup> These words pertain especially to this conversation, because it appears that Johnson, as well as those I included in the “New Perspective on Calvin” (hereafter NPC), have erred in this very fashion. Johnson makes evident that while initially approaching this as a historical theological discussion, his arguments frequently drift in a systematic direction. Marshaling arguments from D. A. Carson concerning union with Christ and imputation, and arguing that the apostle Paul viewed union with Christ as “a more ‘comprehensive’ way of understanding the application of salvation” are not the tools of historical theology but instead of systematic theology.

In this discussion historical theology does not ask “What should we believe?” but rather “What did Calvin say and why?” The two differ significantly in their trajectories and must be viewed as distinct even though historical theology can be used in the service of systematic theology. If Johnson desired to craft his response to a historical article to make a systematic point, he certainly has the right to do so. But this needs to be spelled out clearly from the very beginning so that one asks the proper questions and utilizes the proper tools to find the answers. As Muller has warned, “It is not the task of the historian (nor is it within the scope of historical method) to determine ‘correct doctrine.’” While “churches determine orthodoxy or ‘correct doctrine’ in their creedal or confessional statements[,] historians report, analyze, and otherwise attempt to account for the content and meaning of the past, including ideas and doctrines from the past. The insertion of one’s own theological premises into a historical analysis . . . only muddies the waters and obscures the meaning of the past.”<sup>2</sup> The obvious reason for the importance of this distinction is that neglecting it causes the very deconstruction that Muller previously described. Thus, it seems that by amalgamating these trajectories, theological concerns have driven Johnson and the NPC to impose an interpretive grid on Calvin’s work that lacks congruity with his actual statements.

While it is difficult to determine which gives birth to which, it seems as though Johnson’s systematic commitments are linked to his paradigm of centrality. While he seeks to work within the confines for which Muller has argued (i.e. that it is anachronistic to posit central dogmas/motifs in pre-Enlightenment theologies), it seems as though he is unable to relinquish the influence of such constructs. While he rightly rejects the validity of central dogmas, he nonetheless seeks to retain the belief that union with Christ is a “controlling principle” for much of Calvin’s theology. While a difference indeed exists between the two frameworks, they result in similar interpretive errors.

<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of the Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 93.

The quotation I initially provided from Muller was not aimed at the central dogma argument alone; rather, he went beyond this to criticize those who also interpret Calvin according to “central motifs”:

So too, the studies that examine a particular doctrine or complex of doctrines as Calvin’s central motif are invariably organized and argued in ways that do not reflect either the patterns of organization found in Calvin’s own text or statements that Calvin makes himself concerning the argumentation of his work. Here, in particular, doctrinal statements made in the *Institutes* tend to be harmonized with the statements made in the commentaries, sermons, and treatises with the explicit intention of uncovering theological structures not revealed by Calvin to his readers.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere Muller has also argued that “what may be loosely called ‘theological systems’ in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ought not invariably to be explained dogmatically as the results of use of doctrinal motifs.” And contrary to the imposing of controlling principles, “theological works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to gather their topics or *loci* as results of biblical exegesis and traditionary or confessional identification of issues, and then to assemble the *loci* according to pattern deemed suitable for explanation.”<sup>4</sup> So while Johnson seeks to adhere to Muller’s cautions, he nevertheless defends and practices the very method criticized by Muller here, opting for the term “controlling principle” rather than central or doctrinal “motif.”

Though Calvin never argued for the centrality of union with Christ or any other doctrine, he did regard it and other articles as extremely important, and for certain discussions even used terms such as “foundation” or “hinge” to describe them. But Johnson and the NPC have taken Calvin’s teaching on union with Christ to a level that indeed approaches the interpretive problems of the central dogma method because they have used it as a set of “theological spectacles” which have blurred and ignored the distinctions and language that Calvin made clear.<sup>5</sup> Thus it has become for them a grid that is at times imposed on aspects of Calvin’s thought that does not do justice to what he specifically said.

What Muller described above I referred to as the “uncovering” method, and this proves to be an accurate depiction of some of Johnson’s methods. As a result of what appear to be theological rather than interpretive concerns, this methodology “uncovers” themes in Calvin without proper regard for many of his clear and specific statements to the contrary. Johnson’s procedure in refuting my claim that Calvin does not devote a single *locus* to union with Christ offers a prime example. Conceding that no chapter or *locus* bears the title “union with Christ,” Johnson nonetheless seeks to refute the claim by arguing for the importance of this theme in various *loci*, as well as its

<sup>3</sup> Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin* 5; see also T. H. L. Parker, “The Approach to Calvin,” *EvQ* 16 (1944) 165–72.

<sup>4</sup> Muller, *After Calvin* 98.

<sup>5</sup> Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin* 4.

“inundation” in other places. And while this inundation is doubtless true (especially in *Inst.* 3.1.1), all Johnson’s arguments do is demonstrate exactly what I had already affirmed: “While Calvin wove this concept throughout many of his works and pondered it at times with *pointed significance*, all that this can prove is that he viewed it as important. One cannot, based on this evidence, move beyond it to establish union with Christ as Calvin’s controlling idea.”<sup>6</sup>

Johnson then proceeds to argue that my “assertion that there is no single chapter or *locus* devoted to union with Christ in the entire *Institutes* quite simply fails to do justice to the sacramental nature of Calvin’s soteriology. Surely it cannot be denied that Calvin’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper is in fact a *locus* devoted to union with Christ. And surely the same can be claimed for his treatment of baptism—a “token of our communion with Christ.” The methodology at work here is crucial to see: though Calvin never *explicitly* devotes a single chapter or *locus* to union with Christ, if one finds the concept woven into or included in chapters or *loci* which are explicitly devoted to other topics (sacraments, justification, sanctification, faith, etc.), then one possesses the warrant to “uncover” the fact that union with Christ can now arise beyond the status of mere importance to that of controlling principle. Consequently, this then legitimizes the claim that those discussions must be essentially devoted to union. In other words, though Calvin specifically assigned other topics to these sections, if one dons the proper theological spectacles, it becomes clear that they are actually about union with Christ. One can see why Muller uses the word “deconstruction” to describe such a methodology.

If, however, one can step out of the centrality paradigm, it is possible to free oneself from having to fit Calvin’s work into such a grid and simply to take him at his word—that union with Christ is an important doctrine within his system, so significant that, as is often noted, he claimed that it should be “accorded by us the highest degree of importance.”<sup>7</sup> These words, however, do no more to signal a call to establish this as Calvin’s controlling principle than his claim that justification by faith “is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it.”<sup>8</sup> As Francois Wendel has argued concerning the latter of these quotations, “That sentence would be sufficient proof, if proof were needed, that his having placed regeneration before justification in the *Institutes* did not

<sup>6</sup> Thomas L. Wenger, “The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations,” *JETS* 50 (2007) 327 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. XX–XXI (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975 [1559]), 3.11.10. Second references (hereafter referred to as *CO*) are all from *Iohannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Zcunitz, and Edward Reutz; 59 vol. *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29–98; Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), *CO* 2, col. 540.

<sup>8</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.1; *CO* 2, col. 533.

imply any value of judgment on Calvin's part."<sup>9</sup> Neither one of these quotes can establish centrality but rather a level of serious importance.

This inability to step out of the centrality paradigm has also led Johnson to seek a centrality within my thesis, though I clearly argued to the contrary. He thus views my argument as though it establishes justification as central for Calvin, so as to pit it against union with Christ and/or sanctification in his system. This, in turn, causes Johnson to miss the fact that when I utilized the language of primacy with justification, it was simply to note the organic relationship between justification and sanctification in Calvin's descriptions; it is ordering language, not value or paradigm language.

Similarly, it seems as though unless one accepts union as a "controlling principle" for Calvin, then Johnson and the NPC fear that by default such descriptions of his soteriology will not even account for its presence in his thought. Consequently, they present a false dilemma: either union is central to Calvin's soteriology, thus causing justification and sanctification to flow from Christ, or justification and sanctification are disembodied gifts that are bestowed apart from Christ by a series of decretal acts.<sup>10</sup> Because of the centrality paradigm, they seem unable to accept that while Calvin argued on the one hand that justification and sanctification are indeed bestowed simultaneously and do indeed flow from Christ, he also established an organic relationship between these two gifts in which he described Christ's justifying work for the believer as a "cause" and "foundation" for their sanctification. The "spectacles" of centrality, however, do not permit these nuances, because they force Calvin's words into a foreign theological grid.

Discerning this false dilemma is vital, because this is really the crux of Johnson's criticism and what drives his systematic theological concerns. This has caused him as well as others to fail to take into account Calvin's "cause and effect" language concerning the order of justification and sanctification, and this is what has led to their re-ordering of these soteriological actions upon grounds not found in Calvin's own explanations. I will deal with this at greater length below.

## II. THE THESIS IN GENERAL

Contrary to Johnson's assessment, my thesis was not devoted to downplaying the importance of union in Calvin in order to make justification by faith Calvin's controlling principle, thus separating the bestowal of these gifts from Christ. The crux of my thesis focused on a group of scholars whom I labeled "the NPC" which has recently utilized the doctrine of union with

<sup>9</sup> Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (trans. Philip Mairet; London: Wm. Collins, Sons & Co., 1974) 255–56.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark A. Garcia, "Review Article: No Reformed Theology of Justification?," *Ordained Servant* (October 2007); "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model," *WTJ* 68 (2006) 219–51, esp. 244, n. 67.

Christ as a means of blurring the theological order that Calvin establishes between justification and sanctification. Richard Gaffin's argument here represents the tenets of this view: "Calvin proceeds as he does, and is free to do so, because for him the relative 'ordo' or priority of justification and sanctification is indifferent theologically. Rather, what has controlling soteriological importance is the priority to both of (spiritual, "existential," faith-) to union with Christ."<sup>11</sup>

In the face of these conclusions, I argued that while union with Christ is important, one cannot use it to alter the theological ordering that Calvin makes clear throughout his works. The bulk of my argument then explained how the NPC has made a twofold error in interpreting Calvin in this fashion. First, they have overemphasized Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ to the point that they describe it as a controlling principle (or in synonymous terms). I gave evidence for why this is an anachronistic portrait of Calvin or of anyone writing theology pre-Enlightenment. Second, they have argued for their view that Calvin explained sanctification as a grace given prior to justification simply due to the fact that it is listed prior in Calvin's *ordo docendi* (order of teaching). Arguing from this trajectory, however, misses the point that Calvin did not design his order of teaching as though it described the order in which these saving acts of God actually occur (*ordo salutis*); in other words, his *ordo docendi* is *not* to be viewed as his *ordo salutis*.

But if this was not his reason for structuring Book 3 of the *Institutes* in this fashion, then what was it? I demonstrated that Calvin adhered to, in Muller's words, "Melancthon's very specific sense of the topical arrangement of Romans as the ideal point of departure for theology."<sup>12</sup> So any discussion concerning the order of topics in the *Institutes* and any questions concerning the relationship between justification, sanctification, and other doctrines ought to seek their evidence and answers in Calvin's specific attempts to describe and explain these issues. And this investigation must include a thorough investigation into the historical context which influenced Calvin in both the method and content of his theology.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *WTJ* 65 (2003) 165–79; see similar arguments in Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *WTJ* 64 (2002) 363–86; Tim J. R. Trumper, "Covenant Theology and Constructive Calvinism," *WTJ* 64 (2002) 387–404; Garcia, "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ"; Jae Sung Kim, "*Unio cum Christo*: The Work of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998); David B. Garner, "Adoption in Christ" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002); Kevin Woongsan Kang, "Justified by Faith in Christ: Jonathan Edwards's Doctrine of Justification in Light of Union with Christ" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2003); William Borden Evans, "Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth Century American Reformed Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Muller, "*Ordo Docendi*: Melancthon and the Organization of Calvin's *Institutes*, 1536–1543," in *Melancthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg* (ed. Karin Maag; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 137.

<sup>13</sup> On this issue, Johnson devoted a good deal of space to offer the corrective that "Calvin was able to appreciate Melancthon's methodology and doctrine without slavishly following either." This, I believe, is an unwarranted concern. All I contended for was placing Calvin in his proper

The NPC and many others, however, have instead employed what Muller negatively described above as the “uncovering” method. The NPC exhibits what all too often occurs: commentators operating according to this methodology attribute formulations to Calvin in spite of clear statements that he makes to the contrary. So, for example, the NPC claims that Calvin is “indifferent” about the priority of justification and sanctification in his *ordo salutis*, not based on specific arguments that he made, but based on what they “uncover” from the order in which he lists his *loci* in Book 3. Though Calvin gave specific explanations concerning *why* he ordered things the way that he did, these statements do not inform the NPC’s conclusions. Multiple times, as I sought to illustrate, Calvin contended that there is a crucial organic relationship between justification and sanctification which cannot be overlooked, reversed, or blurred. As I quoted before, Calvin explained why he listed justification and sanctification in the order that he chose, and this illustrates how he actually viewed the relationship of these two gifts:

The theme of justification was therefore more lightly touched upon because it was more to the point to understand first how little devoid of good works is the faith, through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God; and what is the nature of the good works of the saints, with which part of this question is concerned. Therefore we must now discuss these matters thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you *first* of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a *foundation* on which to establish your salvation *nor one on which to build piety* toward God.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin here described justification as a “foundation on which to build piety toward God” and something that must be grasped “first” for the Christian to understand the relationship of the two. Thus, seeking to determine other reasons for his ordering can only proceed by ignoring statements of intent such as these and the danger of doing so is evident: Calvin affirmed precisely the reverse of the NPC conclusion.

Furthermore, did Calvin ever *say* that the ordering of these gifts given by God was unimportant? Did he ever *claim* to be indifferent? On the contrary, as we have seen, he defended the exact opposite position numerous times. As I quoted before, his argument in his *Antidote to Trent* is quite clear: “In short, I affirm, that not by our own merit but by faith alone, are

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historical context which allotted for Melancthonian influence in both the method and content of the *Institutes*. I sought to guard against the very concern that Johnson raises by opening my entire argument saying: “Crucial to the development of Calvin’s *ordo docendi* is the *disagreement* that he had with Melancthon over the art of commentary” (Wenger, “New Perspective” 318; emphasis added); see also T. H. L. Parker, “Calvin the Biblical Expositor,” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: Calvin and Hermeneutics*, vol. 6 (ed. Richard C. Gamble; New York: Garland, 1992) 65–73; Muller, “*Scimus Enim Quod Lex Spiritualis Est*: Melancthon and Calvin on the Interpretation of Romans 7:14–23,” in *Phillip Melancthon (1497–1560) and the Commentary* (ed. Timothy Wengert and Patrick Graham; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 216–37.

<sup>14</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.1; *CO* 2, col. 533.

both our persons and works justified; and that the justification of works depends on the justification of the person, as the effect on the cause. Therefore, it is necessary that the righteousness of faith alone so *precede in order*, and be so *pre-eminent in degree*, that nothing can go before it or obscure it.”<sup>15</sup> This is not Calvin claiming that justification is his central dogma or controlling principle, because he does not operate with such paradigms. Rather, this is part of his overarching picture of the application of Christ’s finished work to us. For Calvin, this justifying action of God is “the foundation” from which our good works and sanctification proceed:

In this sense we shall concede not only a partial righteousness in works, as our adversaries themselves hold, but also that it is approved by God as if it were whole and perfect. *But if we recall the foundation that supports it*, every difficulty will be solved. A work begins to be acceptable only when it is undertaken with pardon. Now whence does this pardon arise, save that God contemplates us and our all in Christ? Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God’s sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ’s purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified. Now if this works righteousness—whatever its character—depends upon faith and free justification, and is effected by this, it ought to be included under faith and be subordinated to it, so to speak, as effect to cause, so far is it from having any right to be raised up either to destroy or becloud justification of faith.<sup>16</sup>

This is an important quotation for several reasons. First of all, it occurs amidst the section of the *Institutes* that Calvin devoted to a lengthy discussion of the relationship of justification to good works. Thus, this occurs where Calvin pointedly intended to explain these matters. Second, Calvin utilized the language of union with Christ several times, but did not employ it to blur the relationship of justification and sanctification; rather, he clarified their order and connection. What is that relationship for Calvin? That Christ’s justifying work on our behalf provides the “foundation” which makes possible our growth in holiness; that these good works depend on justification “as effect to cause”; and that this order is crucial so that sanctification should not “be raised up either to destroy or becloud justification of faith.”

This is the essence of what I argued and illustrated, but it appears that Johnson took from this that my main point was that union with Christ is not crucial for Calvin and concluded “Wenger goes on in this section to claim that the main theme in Calvin’s soteriology (Book 3) is just that of Romans—justification by faith. Thus it is not union that undergirds Calvin’s soteriology but what Calvin saw as the primary purpose of Paul’s letter to the Romans.” I struggle to understand how he could conclude this when I made several

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 3 (ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 128 (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> *Inst.* 3.17.10; *CO* 2, col. 597–98 (emphasis added).

clear statements to the contrary. For instance, when I argued that it is anachronistic to claim that Calvin utilized a central dogma methodology I concluded:

This is not to downplay the importance of Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ; it is clearly a crucial component of his system. Nevertheless, it does not function as the governing paradigm that they claim. *But neither does forensic justification, or any other doctrine. The point is not to argue the centrality of justification over that of union with Christ*; rather, the point is that Calvin did not organize or establish his theology on *any* one principle but instead organized it, in the *Institutes*, according to the *ordo docendi* of Paul's Epistle to the Romans.<sup>17</sup>

I took note several times of what I argued above, that union is important for Calvin but that he uses it to clarify rather than blur his distinctions. The fact that I argued against union with Christ as a controlling principle never took the form of claiming that it lacked importance in his scheme. In fact, in the conclusion of the article I argued the reverse: "Summarily, the NPC is not wrong to point out the importance that union with Christ plays in Calvin's thought. It is obviously significant and any attempt to downplay it will to that degree interpret Calvin improperly."<sup>18</sup>

My purpose in referencing Calvin's belief that in Romans "the main subject of the whole Epistle [is] justification by faith" was not an attempt to posit justification as what "undergirds" all of Book 3, but rather to prevent the objection that would attempt to adhere to the central dogma theory by claiming that union with Christ was the central motif of Romans. I thus demonstrated that Calvin did not see it as central there either. So, taken in context with my entire argument, I am not pitting justification against union with Christ in Calvin. Instead, I simply contend that both occupy important places in his system, and that union with Christ cannot serve to reverse the clear order that Calvin established between justification and sanctification.

Consequently, as mentioned previously, a good deal of Johnson's critique seeks to show that many other scholars have argued for the importance of union with Christ in Calvin's thought and that examining Calvin's work illustrates just how important it is for him. Again, I clearly stated my agreement with this fact and even defended its importance, so Johnson's arguments here address a point that I did not make and a position which I do not hold. For this reason Johnson again illustrates his misunderstanding of my thesis by questioning why I would call beliefs of the NPC "new."<sup>19</sup> In then showing how many others have seen union with Christ as an important component of Calvin's applied soteriology, he demonstrates his assumption that I sought to marginalize union with Christ rather than address the NPC's reordering

<sup>17</sup> Wenger, "New Perspective" 317 (emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 327.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson dislikes the title of my article for multiple reasons, but he primarily thinks that there is nothing essentially new about emphasizing union with Christ in Calvin. However, the newness is not emphasis but rather the realigning of justification and sanctification in light of this centrality paradigm.

of justification and sanctification in Calvin's system. This is clearly what I described as a "new perspective," and while there may indeed be others throughout history who have made similar claims, the authors he lists in defense of this view are not among them.<sup>20</sup>

I stated above that I believe the reason for much of this is the difference in the trajectories of historical and systematic theology. My arguments have been decidedly historical, and in the original article I do not make a single theological claim. My efforts focus solely on exegeting Calvin, and my criticisms of the NPC are solely historiographic. It seems that Johnson has a vested interest to ground his existing theological views in Calvin, and in then grounding Calvin in Paul. This makes interaction difficult, because it leaves the realm in which I argued and takes the discussion in a direction I did not intend to take. I nowhere criticize the theology of the NPC, only their interpretation of Calvin.

### III. SPECIFIC ARGUMENTS

In addressing some of Johnson's specific criticisms I would like to examine further his claim that my interpretation of Calvin's theology tears justification and sanctification apart, not only from one another but also from within the realm of union with Christ. In doing so I will also address his contention that I overlook the distinction between redemption accomplished and applied as well as his argument that I prohibit Calvin from discussing order in Book 3.

Johnson seems to disagree with me most strongly over the fact that I defend the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship in Calvin's view of sanctification and justification. He states, "Calvin's understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification, as Wenger has it, is one of cause and effect: sanctification is impossible if not founded on justification." Due to this, he concludes that I essentially affirm "that justification is an independent soteriological reality that somehow has the power to effect sanctification." This is definitely an unwarranted interpretation and is rooted, as I mentioned above, in his inability to step outside of the centrality paradigm.

Denying a cause-and-effect relationship in Calvin can only proceed when one chooses to adopt a paradigm that can stand at a distance and interpret his theology according to lists of topics and the amount of times certain phrases appear vs. dealing with what he actually argues. We have already seen Calvin say concerning justification that "unless you *first* of all grasp

<sup>20</sup> Johnson specifically cites Wendel and Wilhelm Niesel in support of his claims but the quotations he provides only reference what I readily acknowledge—that for Calvin these benefits flow from union with Christ and are bestowed simultaneously. They merely highlight the importance of union for Calvin and do not go beyond to establish Johnson's case. In fact, as seen above in Wendel, they argue against his conclusions at several points. Niesel goes as far as to say, "Provided this insight is safeguarded by the prior considerations of rebirth or penitence, it must certainly be said that the most important gift which flows to us from our communion with Christ is our justification in the presence of God." Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (trans. Harold Knight; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 131.

what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a *foundation* on which to establish your salvation *nor one on which to build piety* toward God."<sup>21</sup> In addition to this language of foundation we have also witnessed his specific use of cause-and-effect language: "Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified. Now if this works righteousness—whatever its character—depends upon faith and free justification, and is effected by this, it ought to be included under faith and be subordinated to it, so to speak, as *effect to cause*, so far is it from having any right to be raised up either to destroy or becloud justification of faith."<sup>22</sup> And in both cases the context of his arguments occurred in attempts to guard against Roman synergism in soteriology. Thus clarifying the fact that a Christian's growth in holiness does not precede, but is in fact enabled by Christ's justifying work for them, was of crucial importance to Calvin. This does nothing to rend the doctrines of justification and sanctification apart, but instead ties the two together in proper fashion. His frequent explanations of how a Christian's good works can even be acceptable before God clarified this all the more:

If we are to determine a price for works according to their worth, we say that they are unworthy to come before God's sight; that man, accordingly, has no works in which to glory before God; that hence, stripped of all help from works, he is justified by faith alone. But we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ's blood, he obtains forgiveness of sins, and clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat. *After* forgiveness of sins is set forth, the good works that now follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit. For everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity in order not to be brought in question at the divine judgment. Therefore, *after* the guilt of all transgressions that hinder man from bringing forth anything pleasing to God has been blotted out, and *after* the fault of imperfection, which habitually defiles even good works, is buried, the good works done by believers are accounted righteous, or, what is the same thing, are reckoned as righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

Just as with the other quotations this is crucial, because Calvin lists union with Christ right at the beginning of his explanation of what occurs in justification, and yet he moves on to explain how that justifying work of God makes good works in the redeemed possible.

Calvin also often argues in this fashion when rebutting the claims that justification *sola fide* leads to antinomianism. Refuting those who avoid this conclusion by resorting to legalism, he stressed what he viewed as the crucial relationship that justification has to sanctification: "Finally, I say that it is of no use unless we give *prior* place to the doctrine that we are justified by Christ's merit alone, which is grasped through faith, but by no

<sup>21</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.1; *CO* 2, col. 533.

<sup>22</sup> *Inst.* 3.17.10; *CO* 2, col. 598.

<sup>23</sup> *Inst.* 3.17.8; *CO* 2, col. 596–97 (emphasis added).

merits of our own works, *because no men can be fit for the pursuit of holiness save those who have first imbibed this doctrine.*"<sup>24</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the arguments of Johnson and the NPC that use union with Christ either to invert this relationship of justification and sanctification or to argue for Calvin's indifference concerning it.

Johnson expresses surprise that I referenced Calvin's arguments against Osiander on this topic because in his judgment "Calvin's problem with Osiander was that his understanding of justification destroyed the foundation for the believer's *assurance of salvation.*" Calvin, to be sure, does address this aspect of Osiander's theology, but Johnson overlooks the reason why Calvin believed that such formulae undermined the Christian's assurance. Calvin was convinced that Osiander's doctrine of justification via the impartation of Christ's divine essence necessarily led to, along with many other errors, a commingling of justification and sanctification. Thus, in his refutations, he frequently clarified his view of the proper relationship between these two gifts so that the believer would look to the objective, forensic nature of Christ's justifying work which secured for them the proper mindset to understand Christ's sanctifying work. This, then, he thought, would protect their assurance from resting on their works and cause it instead to rest in Christ. Hence, Calvin argued that "Osiander objects that it would be insulting to God and contrary to his nature that he should justify those who actually remain wicked. Yet we must bear in mind what I have already said, that the grace of justification is not separated from regeneration [sanctification], although they are things distinct." Since our sanctification always remains imperfect in this life, it is crucial to remember that "justification must be very different from reformation into newness of life." But he then shows why establishing the distinction between these two is so crucial: "Thence Paul argues from contraries that the inheritance does not come from the law, for in this way "faith would be nullified." For faith totters if it pays attention to works, since no one, even of the most holy, will find there anything on which to rely."<sup>25</sup> For this reason I fail to understand why it is surprising that I would utilize this evidence when explaining how Calvin viewed the relationship between justification and sanctification. Throughout his arguments against Osiander Calvin references this issue far more than he does assurance.

The danger of meeting Johnson's and the NPC's claims with quotations such as these is that the argument can appear as one based on selective proof-texting. I have argued, however, both here and in my original article, that these quotations do not simply stand on their own, but rather demonstrate that when one attends to the places in Calvin's work where he specifically intends to discuss these and like matters, a clear picture of his view of the relationship of justification to sanctification emerges. If his specific words interpreted within their proper context contrast with attempts to reformulate his doctrine based upon assumed centralities and/or inferences

<sup>24</sup> *Inst.* 3.16.3; *CO* 2, col. 588 (emphasis added).

<sup>25</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.11; *CO* 2, col. 542; see also *Inst.* 3.11.6; *CO* 2, col. 537.

from his order of teaching, his specific words must receive priority. Anything else falls into the very “deconstruction” against which Muller has warned.

Johnson’s use of this interpretive paradigm causes him to view my explanation of this relationship as though sanctification is less important or of lesser value in Calvin’s soteriology. But I plainly argued for a priority of order and the preservation of the organic relationship between justification and sanctification and nowhere asserted a hierarchy of value between the two. In the midst of this argument, his attempt to correct my use of the phrase “two graces” vs. the specific rendering of *duplex gratia* is unnecessary because Calvin clearly described the double grace as consisting of two distinct gifts even though they are bestowed simultaneously and are closely related.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is not improper to refer to them as “graces” in that context. Denying the legitimacy of this language pushes in the direction of ignoring the distinction between the two that Calvin made so clear.

For similar reasons, I believe that Johnson’s theological biases have caused him to charge me with overlooking Calvin’s distinction between accomplished and applied soteriology. This further illustrates Johnson’s misunderstanding of my thesis as though it contended for the primacy of forensic categories in Calvin’s soteriology vs. the applied categories. Removing the spectacles of centrality, however permits one to see that Calvin can establish order from one perspective without obliterating the relationships between their ultimate source in Christ as well as their organic connection to one another. I clearly never argued against distinguishing between accomplishment and application in Calvin’s soteriology. Rather, I argued for a proper view of the distinction which does not overapply it to such a degree that one misses the aspects of applied soteriology that Calvin clearly explains in Book 2. As I stated, “The Pauline *ordo docendi* is still the prominent organizing principle to the work, so that it is acceptable to talk of soteriological elements in Book 2, as well as Christological elements in Book 3 without an over-zealous application of the I. *God*, II. *Christ*, III. *Spirit*, IV. *Church* structure prohibiting such flexibility.”<sup>27</sup>

On these grounds it seems that Johnson also argues that my thesis prohibits Calvin from discussing issues of order in Book 3. I struggle to see how he could conclude that I prohibit discussions of order since the bulk of my argument focuses on the crucial order of justification and sanctification and pulls a large degree of its evidence from Book 3. I even sought to safeguard against this very misinterpretation: “This is not to say, however, that Calvin did not believe in *any* logical, scriptural or temporal order in the realm of soteriology but rather that the notion of attributing to him some kind of formal *ordo salutis* is an anachronistic endeavor.”<sup>28</sup> What I opposed was establishing a faulty order based on the improper equating of the Calvin’s *ordo docendi* with an *ordo salutis* which is facilitated by overlooking

<sup>26</sup> In addition, this has been a traditionally acceptable means of describing Calvin’s language in this passage of the *Institutes*, as the English translations of Niesel and Wendel have shown. See Wendel, *Calvin* 257; Niesel, *Theology of Calvin* 130.

<sup>27</sup> Wenger, “New Perspective” 319–20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 318.

the historical context for why Calvin ordered the *Institutes* the way that he did. Making these errors causes one to establish an *ordo* for Calvin that does not take into account his specific explanations for the relationships of various doctrines to one another. If indeed Book 3 is to function as an actual *ordo salutis*, then Calvin actually believes that God sanctifies people before he justifies them. This flies in the face of even Johnson's arguments for the simultaneity of the gifts of justification and sanctification. There is ample evidence in Calvin's work that he did not believe that the order took place in this fashion, and this illustrates yet one more reason why establishing an *ordo salutis* based merely upon his *ordo docendi* cannot stand. While it may be convenient to stand at a distance and infer an *ordo* in Calvin based upon a mere list, it disregards the myriad of places mentioned above where he argued both exegetically and systematically for a crucial relationship between Christ's justifying and sanctifying work.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I am grateful for the opportunity that Johnson's critique has provided to clarify these issues and explore them to a greater depth. Ultimately I believe that the NPC and Johnson alike have permitted an undue degree of theological bias to color their interpretation of Calvin on several issues, most notably their claim that union with Christ is a controlling principle for him and the consequent repositioning of justification and sanctification in his thought. This is not to claim that systematic theology cannot make use of historical theology; indeed, nothing could be farther from the truth. Rather, it is simply a reminder that one needs to be conscious of which task one undertakes because the two disciplines ask different questions, pursue different goals, and use different tools. Johnson, I believe, has illustrated how blurring these tasks results in blurred historical pictures. Operating within his paradigm of centrality, Johnson shares the methodology of the NPC and others who seem unable to extricate themselves from viewing many of Calvin's ideas through what Muller called "theological spectacles" which result in deconstructing Calvin "in search of a theological or religious ally or, occasionally, in search of a historical source for the theological trials of the present."<sup>29</sup> As a result of this, Calvin's clear arguments in favor of viewing Christ's justifying work as a "foundation" or "cause" for Christ's sanctifying work do not factor into their equation because they remain outside the lenses of such a methodology.

I wish to reiterate that in no way has my argument sought to establish justification as Calvin's "central motif" or "controlling principle." Nor have I sought to rend Calvin's doctrines of justification and sanctification apart from either union with Christ or from one another. I have simply made a modest plea for interpreters of Calvin to take seriously his specific explanations of order and relationship in both accomplished and applied soteriology and to place him within his historical context in order to avoid the anachronisms that unfairly construe his formulae into mirror images of the interpreter.

<sup>29</sup> Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* 4.