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"Free Choice" in Calvin's Concepts of Regeneration and Moral Agency: How Free Are We?

By Jonathan S. Marko*

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay will demonstrate that John Calvin (1509-1564), although denying free choice regarding regeneration, teaches that human beings, Christian and non-Christian, have freedom to act morally.[1] Similar to many ethicists and philosophers today, Calvin presupposes that, unless there is actual contingency in our choices and we have moral beliefs in our deliberation, we cannot be considered responsible agents and therefore cannot be considered to have freedom to act morally.[2] Whenever *contingency* is used in this paper it will be used, like the early Reformed, to refer to:

> an absence of necessity, not to be equated with chance, but rather to be understood as the result of free operation of secondary causes. In a contingent circumstance, an effect results from clearly definable causes, though the effect could be different, given an entirely possible and different interrelation of causes. In short, a contingent event or thing is a nonnecessary event or thing that either might not exist or could be other than it is.[3]

Likewise, in this essay *free choice* will be defined as choice "free from external constraint and from an imposed necessity."[4] *Acting morally* will be understood as externally conforming to the second table of the Reformed recension of the Decalogue.[5]

This essay encompasses three different issues that have not been treated together explicitly in a published essay on Calvin.[6] The first issue, salvation and free choice as taught by Calvin, is generally agreed upon, but misunderstandings in the finer details lead to disagreement. The second issue, concerning Calvin's beliefs regarding free choice in earthly matters and contingency in general, is well tread, but is often spoken with inconsistent verbiage. Terms such as

*Jonathan Marko (M.Div., ATS) is a Ph.D. student in Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids.

"determinism" and "free will" are encumbered with nuances unique to each writer. The third and final issue, free choice regarding personal morality in Christians and non-Christians as conceived by Calvin, is one that has been hardly touched by scholarship.

Regarding the second issue, insufficiently precise terms often muddle the conversation. For instance, recent scholarship from Paul Helm and Terrance Tiessen understand Calvin to be a "compatibilist" with regard to causal determinism.[7] Not surprising, malleable terms such as this still offer considerable movement within the boundaries. Another imprecise term too cavalierly used in discussing Calvin is "determinism." Georgia Harkness, although not commenting on whether or not Calvin admits contingency and free choice into his system, nevertheless claims that he is a determinist (which necessarily removes human responsibility in her mind) by virtue of his doctrines of perseverance, predestination, election, foreknowledge, and pre-determination.[8] Vincent Brümmer, with a more balanced reading of Calvin readily acknowledges that he teaches free choice and deliberation in mundane matters, but nonetheless believes Calvin's doctrine of perseverance renders his system objectively incoherent or utterly deterministic. Willem Balke, Richard A. Muller, A.N.S. Lane, and Allen Verhey admit that Calvin conceives of divine determinism (which rules out chance) as the basis for, and not contrary to, actual contingency, free choice, and responsibility. Muller, however, claims that "it is certainly true that Calvin's doctrine represents one of the strictest formulations of the divine decree and perhaps the formulation [among those of his Reformed contemporaries] that is least sensitive to traditional discussions of divine permission and secondary causality."[9] Balke appears more comfortable than his like-minded colleagues in allowing Calvin to be labeled a determinist, as long as certain qualifications are understood. In short, although most will acknowledge that Calvin conceives of free choice in his writings, some will deny this is coherent with the rest of his theology.

Regarding the third issue, scholarship is rather mute. When moral free choice is discussed, the conversation also becomes murky over imprecise terminology. Typically Calvin scholarship equates acting morally with doing a spiritual good:[10] doing something in faith, in conformance with God's law, and for God's glory.[11] Calvin most often identifies spiritual good with moral good. However, he speaks of the capabilities of non-Christians to exhibit external virtue, even allowing it to be called "moral" in the common manner of speaking for the sake of expediency. Later, I will demonstrate from Calvin's writings that

using the term moral in this latter sense (external conformance) in ethical discussions is preferable.

Although there is not ample room to even scratch the surface regarding the contemporary discussion (or even a historical survey) of providence, free will, moral agency, and moral ontology, it is my conviction that unless there is actual contingency in our choices, and unless we have moral beliefs, we cannot be considered responsible agents and therefore cannot be considered to have freedom to act morally. Calvin agrees. In Part II of this essay, I will first bring to the fore how free Calvin believes the human will to be. This requires further investigation into the two other aforementioned areas. Therefore in Part III, I will demonstrate that Calvin believes actual free choice and contingency are predicated on divine determinism. Part IV will follow with an investigation of our faculties and abilities that Calvin affirms enable Christians and non-Christians to morally deliberate in a responsible manner, which will bring our discussion back to the will, among other concerns. I will not concentrate heavily on the related issues of prelapsarian spiritual, moral, and sinful free choice. This is not intended to be a theodicy proper. This can only serve as a brief sketch that paves the way for further investigation into Calvin that brings this preeminent thinker to life in the present. My goal is to exhibit and explain what Calvin affirms and denies regarding free choice in spiritual, mundane, and moral matters, without resorting to verbiage that he would not recognize. I will however assess Calvin's thoughts in each part of the essay based on my rationale and understanding of Scripture from a Reformed background.

II. FREEDOM OF THE WILL?

There is no question that Calvin would gladly rid the Church of the term *liberum arbitrium* ("free choice"). A term that offers an inch in one direction is taken for miles in another direction when not appropriated correctly into a Reformed biblical framework. It normally conjures up the typical human illusions of having the option of performing a spiritual good and even having the final say with regard to one's regeneration.[12] The options from which unregenerate humans actually have the ability to choose, rendering their wills "free," are in Calvin's mind insignificant.[13]

Originally, human beings' souls were created in the image of God, which "denoted the integrity with which Adam was endued when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated to reason, all his senses duly regulated . . ."[14] At this time of purity, the will was subordinated to the intellect: "the office

of the intellect being to distinguish between objects, according as they seem deserving of being approved or disapproved; and the office of the will, to choose and follow what the intellect declares to be good, to reject and to shun what it declares bad." Calvin asserts that ideally the will waited on the intellect in matters of desire and all decisions. But this subordination was not a necessity.[15] Calvin is clearer regarding the prelapsarian and postlapsarian state of human beings than he is of the state of the humans *at* the fall. He concedes that God did not bless Adam and Eve with constancy, but nonetheless, the power of the will they did have was "sufficient to take away every excuse."[16] The will and the intellect were badly harmed in the fall. Calvin, following Aquinas, now ascribes choice as an act that includes both the corrupt will and intellect, but that "inclines" to the will (or "appetite").[17]

Calvin delineates between four descriptors associated with the human will: free, bound, self-determined, and coerced. A will can be self-determined as long as it is not coerced. That is, an action cannot be voluntary if it is "forcibly driven by an external impulse." However, a self-determined, or voluntary will, can be of two types according to Calvin: free or bound. Condescending to the common understanding of the general public, Calvin allows "free will" then to mean the power to choose between spiritual good or evil. Unregenerate humans do not have this. They have bound wills. These, however, must not be confused with coerced wills.[18] Calvin explains:

> For we do not say that man is dragged unwillingly into sinning, but that because his will is corrupt he is held captive under the yoke of sin and therefore of necessity wills in an evil way. For where there is bondage, there is necessity. But it makes a great difference whether the bondage is voluntary or coerced. We locate the necessity to sin precisely in the corruption from the will, from which it follows that it is self-determined.[19]

There is no question in Calvin's mind that each human being is affixed with a will, nor is it his intention to not concede some kind of choice. On the contrary, we have wills, but they are bad. And bad wills—which are still choosing wills—by necessity can and will only choose to sin in spiritual matters. Yet, they voluntarily choose the bad in every spiritual circumstance.[20] Their choices in *how* to sin are contingent, as are their choices in mundane matters. Simply put, no good spiritual works can be performed by the unregenerate will: "All this

being admitted, it will be beyond dispute, that free will does not enable a man to perform good works, unless he is assisted by grace; indeed, the special grace which the elect alone receive through regeneration."[21]

God is in fact the only one to whom we can rightly ascribe all types of spiritual good: regeneration, good works in general, and perseverance. God alone by his grace converts us. We have absolutely no assistance in this event. Our wills are converted from evil to good. This is not to say, as did Pighius, that God destroys the will of the human itself.[22] Rather one must distinguish between: 1) the faculty or substance of the will; 2) the habit of the will (*habitus*); and 3) the acts that the will performs. The faculty or substance of the will is a permanent fixture that remains as it was originally. The *habitus* is the disposition (spiritual capacity) of the will that is good in the regenerate person and bad in the unregenerate. The acts are those things that the will chooses to do. The will with the good *habitus*, or good will, can do spiritually good acts. The will with the bad *habitus*, or bad will, can do only spiritually bad acts.[23] Calvin affirms that God does not destroy the faculty of the will, "for in conversion everything essential to our original nature remains," but rather he changes the disposition of the will from evil to good, thereby rendering the good will capable of choosing to perform spiritually good acts, a power not had prior. [24] However, Calvin is adamant in not allowing Christians to go so far as to claim good works for themselves. All good works are God's works. Granted these good works are performed by our good wills, but the good *habiti* or dispositions are given by God in order that the good be done. It is not as if we chose to have good wills with our bad ones. That is not within our power. In fact, the corruption of humanity, which is not completely cured in Christians, continues to battle against their good wills, requiring God to continually assist us.[25] He sums this up nicely in the following passage:

> In this way, the Lord both begins and perfects the good work in us, so that it is due to Him, first, that the will conceives a love of rectitude, is inclined to desire, is moved and stimulated to pursue it; secondly, that this choice, desire, and endeavour fail not, but are carried forward to effect; and lastly, that we go on without interruption, and persevere to the end.[26]

It is on this last count of perseverance that Brümmer, who admits that Calvin conceives logically of actual free choice and contingency,[27] claims Calvin steps too far, and becomes a post-conversion determinist. This can be

refuted on two counts. First, Brümmer, like Pighius, does not differentiate between the substance or faculty of the will and the *habitus*. Whereas Brümmer ascribes free choice to a will with a bad *habitus* that can choose freely in its sinning, he surprisingly denies free choice in a regenerate will, in Calvin's view, because it cannot reject God's saving grace. Brümmer writes, "However, if the exercise of free choice on our part is necessary, it follows that we retain the ability to do the unthinkable, namely to as yet say no to God and to reject his offer of grace. It is this implication that Calvin rejects."[28] In short, Brümmer conflates the substance of the will and the *habitus*, misbelieving that the faculty can choose its own disposition. Calvin is not saying that the will with a good *habitus* cannot chose to sin (it is not yet perfect) but that it cannot chose to reject God's saving grace. [29] Second, Calvin understands a good will to be significantly free and an incorruptible will to offer the most liberty. Freedom from sinning is the true freedom, a biblical concept from Romans 6:20-22, which Brümmer misses.[30] That grace alone is responsible for regeneration of the will and subsequent perseverance is why Willem Balke rightly will allow Calvin to be called a (soteriological) "determinist," and why Vincent Brümmer wrongly ascribes Calvin as a (soteriological and providential) "determinist."[31]

To my mind, Calvin's arguments are rather convincing. Romans 6:20-22 appears to be well ingrained into Calvin's mind: when we were slaves, we were free from righteousness, and true freedom entails being enslaved to God. Regarding the saved, who of them would want the possibility of losing their salvation? Why would anyone desire to be sick, insane, or in sin? How is that true freedom? It is only our remaining corruption within us that likes the prospect of being able to sin. Furthermore, one of the main themes throughout Scripture is dependence on God. Likewise, true freedom in Calvin's mind is this absolute dependence. Moreover, as many philosophers have argued, if a desire to sin or an ability to sin is requisite of freedom, then God cannot be free.

In sum, then, we find from Calvin's works that everyone has a faculty of the will by which we can choose our actions, regardless of the corresponding *habitus* or disposition of that faculty. Those who God does not regenerate have free choice in matters mundane and in options of doing spiritual bad, but they do not have the choice of doing a spiritual good. They sin necessarily, yet voluntarily. Those who God decides to regenerate still sin but do not have the ability to reject his saving grace. Their wills can actually choose to perform spiritual good, but God the giver gets the real credit, for He has given Christians *habiti* or dispositions of the will that they could not choose to have. It is similar

to a caring father holding his very young child up in the water. He will allow him to splash and turn, even try to swim, but will never allow him to drown. In short, Calvin does not believe we have any hand or power to choose in regards to our own regeneration.

III. FREE CHOICE AND DETERMINISM

John Calvin is accused of being a philosophical determinist that rules out human responsibility for reasons other than his views on our incapacities that preclude us from assisting with regeneration. Some, however, unwittingly equate "predestination" with "providential decree." The providential decree is the eternal decree in its entirety pertaining to the ordination of all things that come to pass. Predestination is part of this providential decree by which God chooses who He will regenerate. [32] Providence upholds free choice and contingency, as will be demonstrated, and predestination upholds only God's choice in reference to regeneration, as already discussed. But even scholars who understand the distinction in these terms continue to misinterpret Calvin usually due to an insufficient close and extended reading of what he says. Calvin, indeed, had to battle these misunderstandings in his own day.[33] The pastoral tenor of his writings on providence in the *Institutes*, employed to build assurance in God's control and special care for his people, are easily taken out of context to mean what Calvin does not.

Calvin ascribes to God both a general and special providence (not to be equated to predestination), corresponding to His role as Creator and His role as Governor and Preserver, respectively. Not only did God design the universe, its laws, and create everything (general providence), but by his special providence He is continuously "sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest detail."[34] Due to the latter, randomness, chance, fortune, and the like do not actually exist as causes.[35] According to Calvin, "God is deemed omnipotent, not because he can act though he may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct, he continues the order of nature previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his [secret] counsel."[36] This is not said in the spirit of a thoroughgoing determinism that rules out contingency, but in pastoral comfort. A few sentences later he asserts, "This rather is the solace of the faithful, in their adversity, that everything which they endure is by the ordination and command of God, that they are under his hand." [37] Contrary to the "Epicureans" of Calvin's day who maintained that

human powers govern themselves, he claims that the "world" and "the affairs of men, and men themselves" are governed by God's decrees.[38] Calvin's biblical and pastoral bent keeps him emphasizing God's comprehensive control in all things that come to pass against chance and the possibility of someone doing something against God's secret counsel. He does this throughout chapters sixteen and seventeen of book one of the *Institutes*. However, he does not intend to convey a Stoic impression of universal ineluctability. In the same chapters he writes:

> For we do not with the Stoics imagine a necessity consisting of a perpetual chain of causes, and a kind of involved series contained in nature, but we hold that God is the disposer and ruler of all things,--that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed.[39]

Nowhere in his discourse on divine special providence in the *Institutes* does he throw out the concept of free choice. In fact, although not his primary concern, he affirms it. He writes:

> The Christian, then, being most fully persuaded that all things come to pass by the dispensation of God, and that nothing happens fortuitously, will always direct his eye to him as the principle cause of all events, at the same time paying due regard to inferior causes in their own place. Next, he will have not doubt that a special providence is awake for his preservation, and will not suffer anything to happen that will not turn to his good and safety. But as its business is first with men and then with the other creatures, he will feel assured that the providence of God reigns over both.[40]

We definitely have a role to play in our existence. Calvin may call himself, other men, and creatures inferior as causes, as above, but he does not call their causation non-existent, or even unimportant. It is inferior regarding humans only in that our choices do not escape the decrees of God. God is not surprised or ever put at a disadvantage in helping his people because he ordained all that comes to pass.

When Calvin writes, "since the will of God is said to be the cause of all things, all the counsels and actions of men must be held to be governed by his providence; so that he not only exerts his power in the elect, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, but also forces the reprobate to do him service," it must be taken

within its larger context.[41] Again he does not deny free choice. Calvin is also rather clear in affirming the powers of deliberation in the Christian who is "guided"[42] and even in the heathen who is "forced."[43] When he speaks of the heathen as being forced, he simply means that God, with a good will, governs and directs the unregenerate agent's actions for His good purposes, even though the unregenerate agent uses his/her bad will for his/her purposes, which are never of any spiritual good. Calvin writes, "[W]hen God makes his scrutiny, he looks not to what men could do, or to what they did, but to what they wished to do, thus taking into account their will and purpose."[44]

Scholars, like Harkness, who conclude that Calvin was a determinist, do so based not on his writings but rather an existential presupposition. The "irreconcilable conflict between his [Calvin's] doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty and man's responsibility" is only irreconcilable when one cannot conceive of existence and the universe without chance and the unknown.[45] Calvin writes: "God . . . never permits a separation of His prescience from His power!" Subsequently, he writes: " 'If . . . God foresaw that which He did not will to be done, God holds not the supreme rule over all things. God, therefore, ordained that which should come to pass, because nothing could have been done had He not willed it to be done.' "[46] Muller rightly interprets this passage thus: "In other words, freedom and contingency not only are compatible with an eternal decree that ordains all things, but also depends on it."[47] As further support to this interpretation, Calvin writes:

> First of all, there is a universal operation by which He guides all creatures according to the condition and propriety which He had given each when He made them. This guidance is
> nothing other than what we call "the order of nature." For whereas unbelievers only recognize in the arrangement of the world what their eyes see and thus view nature as a design or essence that rules over all, we are compelled to give this praise to the will of God, as it alone governs and moderates all things.[48]

This again affirms that Calvin believes that God's freedom is the basis of our freedom, deliberation, choice, and our responsibility as agents.[49]

Calvin's version of decretal determinism that actually establishes the aspects of existence that make us responsible is, I believe, correct. For one, I cannot conceive of God not having control over all things. This comprehensive control accords with Job, the Prophets, and the creation story in Genesis. How else could Job have looked past Satan and the forces of nature and conceived of

God as taking away his children and property (Job 1:21)? Yet at the same time I cannot conceive of merely consenting to a universal ineluctability where my freedom must be defined as vaguely as "doing what I want to do," without actual free choice, as in Jonathan Edwards' understanding.[50] In ruling out chance, Edwards ruled out contingency as well. Discipline passages such as 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18:15-20 do not appear to comport in reality with compatibilists of the Jonathan Edwards variety. Church disciplinary steps without actual choice involved seem to be merely conditioning. That is, the disciplinary steps are simply blocks or impediments that help correct the trajectory of a will moving through space-time. Overall, Calvin's conception is definitely a different view of existence than that with which most of us are familiar, but it accords with difficult books like Job that bring up hard questions of agency and providence. Our free choice being predicated upon God's decrees is difficult to conceive because it is a relationship between Creator and creature that is unparalleled in our experience. Father and children are as close as we can get, but we tend to quickly push the metaphor too far in a way to elevate humans to have the same creative freedom that God has.

What we find, then, is that Calvin's conception of general and special providence is such that nothing comes to pass that God has not decreed. However, Calvin does not conceive of this powerful view of providence destroying the power of deliberation, contingency, and free choice. On the contrary, according to Calvin's understanding of providence, it is that upon which these aspects of existence are predicated. God wills our choice and wills it to be free and contingent.

IV. SOURCES OF OUR MORAL BELIEFS AND DELIBERATIONS

John Calvin is quite adamant that fallen human beings have no capability of doing "good."[51] From the fall, the gifts naturally endowed to humans were corrupted--soundness of the intellect and integrity of the will. Our supernatural gifts were withdrawn: faith, love to God, charity towards neighbor, righteousness, etc.[52] As a result, the unregenerate have no ability to follow the moral law. They have no power to obey the first table of the Decalogue, which means at best the second table can be obeyed externally.[53] They can will nothing God deems good because they can never will rightly and never for a purpose to

glorify God.[54] Thus Calvin makes a strong and clear case for not ascribing to any unregenerate person a "moral" or "good" action.

The Reformed tradition is posed with an issue of verbiage. Should we continue to use Calvin's verbiage above and as a result claim that no unregenerate person can do anything moral or good? Should we accept the further result of lumping altogether the actions of the unregenerate, some of which are obviously more or less orderly than others and some that are absolutely destructive? Or instead, should "doing good" or "acting morally" be descriptive of external obedience to the second table or natural law, regardless of intentions. This would mean that "spiritual good" could still be applied to actions that accord with God's preceptive will internally and externally.

There are numerous reasons, some from Calvin himself, which lead me to think we should not adopt Calvin's typical verbiage that he uses in the *Institutes*, but rather use the language just proposed. I will briefly cover a few of the most important. First, it is rather difficult to discern a person's intentions, let alone whether a certain person is a Christian or not. However, Christians and non-Christians alike are more apt at perceiving external conformance than they are perceiving intentions and motivations of others. Second, discussions of ethics and law would become impractical if we made no distinction between the acts of the unregenerate. Thus, we would classify both the unregenerate law-abiding citizen and the unregenerate serial killer as bad or immoral, when one clearly conducts him/herself in better accordance with the natural law. Contrary to his typical manner of speaking, even Calvin is quite clear that he is fine with the "common language" that ascribes good to the unregenerate, as long as all are clear that the good does not refer to a spiritual good:

> For we must either put Cataline on the same footing with Camillus, or hold Camillus to be an example of that nature, when carefully cultivated, is not wholly void of goodness. I admit that the specious qualities which Camillus possessed were divine gifts, and appear entitled to commendation in themselves . . . Still, the surest and easiest answer to the objection is, that those are not common endowments of nature, but special gifts of God, which he distributes in divers forms, and in a definite measure, to men otherwise profane. For which reason, we hesitate not, in common language, to say, that one of a good, another of a vicious nature; though we cease not to hold that both are placed under the universal condition of human depravity.[55]

He offers a similar sentiment when commenting positively on the moral conduct of those who are non-Christian, yet display virtue.[56] Third, Calvin is quite clear that the regenerate and unregenerate have the power of holding moral beliefs that can be obeyed, regardless of the intentions lying behind the actions that result. This final point will occupy us for the rest of this section.

Although the image of God (which pertains to the soul only) that Adam and Eve once held with purity is badly corrupted, it is still present in all humans, regenerate or unregenerate. God kept it from being *utterly* corrupted in us.[57] Thus the two parts of the soul, the intellect and will, were corrupted. Much has been said about the will already, but not as much regarding the intellect. It is into this faculty that Calvin places what many philosophers preceding Calvin would have kept as separate "powers and faculties": imagination, memory, reason, conscience, ideas, etc. However, all of this is not to say that Calvin cleanly separates the will and the intellect or that he denies an interpenetration of the powers of these two faculties. Otherwise the will could not be informed by the powers of the intellect.[58] All of these sub-faculties, capacities, or roles of the intellect are intertwined and some are of a higher order than others in that they are evaluating, governing, and judging, namely the conscience and reason. Reason and conscience are so closely associated with the intellect in Calvin's discourse that all three are nearly identifiable.

The judgment of the reason is the judgment of the intellect.[59] Moreover, reason has a few different sources from which to pull in spiritual and earthly matters. The reason originally had three sources of spiritual knowledge: "the knowledge of God, the knowledge of his paternal favour toward us, which constitutes our salvation, and the method of regulating of our conduct in accordance with the Divine Law."[60] However, regarding the unregenerate, the first, the knowledge of God, or *sensus divinitatis*, is only enough to leave them without excuse for their impiety. The second, the knowledge of his paternal favor, is completely obliterated in the unregenerate. The third, the Divine Law, is harmed but rather lively in all humans.[61] This Divine Law is in fact identified with the natural law and the moral law of the Decalogue. Although our abilities to perceive the natural law in its entirety are defunct, the written law was given to bolster our understanding.[62] However, reason uses ideas and the natural law in its search and apprehension of truth in mundane (non-spiritual) matters as well. This is what enables humans to cooperate and interact in a civil and ethical manner. Calvin writes that there are two types of intelligence, one in earthly matters, and one in heavenly matters. The former consists of "matters of policy

and economy, all mechanical arts and liberal studies." He also says that man is by nature a social creature endowed with a natural instinct for the preservation of society. That is, we all have "impressions of civil order and honesty" whereby we easily understand the need for laws and the reasoning for the laws themselves. In summary, he writes: "Hence the universal agreement in regard to such subjects [laws and their principles], both among nations and individuals, the seeds of them being implanted in the breasts of all without a teacher or lawgiver."[63]

Calvin also demonstrates the ways in which the consciences of all humans use the natural law and the *sensus divinitatis*. The conscience constantly feels a pull or obligation from the natural law with which it is fairly well apprized, as he states in the *Institutes*:

> We are certainly under the same obligation as they [the Israelites] were; for they cannot doubt that the claim of absolute perfection which God made for his Law is perpetually in force.[64]

And again, he writes:

> Moreover, the very things contained in the two tables, are in a manner, dictated to us by that internal law, which, as has been already said, is in a manner written and stamped on every heart. For conscience, instead of allowing us to stifle our perceptions, and sleep on without interruption, acts as an inward witness and monitor, reminds us of what we owe to God, points out the distinction between good and evil, and therbey [thereby] convicts us of departure from duty. But man, being immured in the darkness of error, is scarcely able, by means of the natural law, to form any tolerable idea of the worship which is acceptable to God . . . Therefore, as a necessary remedy, both for our dulness and our contumacy, the Lord has given us his written Law, which, by its sure attestations, removes the obscurity of the law of nature, and also, by shaking off our lethargy, makes a more lively and permanent impression on our minds.[65]

Thus, the natural law enables us to know what obedience to the second table is, but not to the first table, the proper worship of God, due to the harmed receptivity of our corrupted natures. Moreover, the *sensus divinitatis* is marred such that the unregenerate are without excuse, but it is still not able to lead them to right worship.[66] Whatever the case, the consciences of all humans, and hence

their intellects, are well informed as to what is required of them according to the natural law.

Although he does not go into much detail, Calvin uses Romans 2:14 to demonstrate that the will (or heart) is informed by the powers of the intellect, by the fact that the unregenerate often do what their consciences suggests to them.[67] There is an inseparability regarding the will and the intellect that none can fully comprehend. However this is done, the souls of all human beings have not only innate beliefs of moral acts, but they even have the constant conviction of their consciences from its apprehension of the natural law.

I am fully convinced that Calvin leaves the unregenerate and regenerate person without excuse in acting morally. We are all endowed with faculties that are sufficient in telling us what is permissible, what is obligatory, and what is impermissible according to the natural law. Furthermore, Calvin's conceptions of the will and intellect accord well with Romans 2:12-16, regarding the moral beliefs and convictions of non-Christians, as well as Romans 7, assuming it discusses Christians.[68] I also find it accurate because of its deft incorporation of the natural law, which I feel is the most sensible option in meta-ethics. While this is not the time or the place to go into a full blown defense of natural law, there is one quote given by one of the great defenders of natural law upon which we can all agree. C.S. Lewis writes: "Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining 'It's not fair' before you can say Jack Robinson." That is why Lewis calls the natural law, at times, the law of human nature.[69]

In sum, from Calvin, we find that he allows a qualified use of the terms "good" and "moral" to be ascribed to the unregenerate. Calvin himself realizes people generally speak in this manner. We find, from a further investigation into the faculties of all humans, compelling reasons to use the term moral to describe external obedience to the natural law in discussing ethics. All humans, Christian or non-Christian, are responsible agents endowed with moral beliefs, faculties, and convictions. We are without excuse for our disobedience to the natural law.

V. CONCLUSION

In this essay I demonstrated that John Calvin, although denying free choice regarding regeneration, teaches that human beings, Christian and non-

Christian, have freedom to act morally. This is important in establishing moral responsibility. Unless there is actual contingency in our choices and we have moral beliefs in our deliberation we cannot be considered responsible agents and therefore cannot be considered to have freedom to act morally. In Part II, I showed that postlapsarian humans are born with bad dispositions or *habiti* where their wills necessarily and voluntarily chooses only the bad in spiritual matters. These are bound wills. However, God gives to some, Christians, good dispositions or *habiti* while not destroying the substance or faculty of their wills. These good wills can sin but will never reject God's saving grace. This is not to be viewed as having a bound will. On the contrary, Calvin rightly follows the Bible in holding that sin is true bondage and freedom is bondage to God and righteousness. In Part III, I demonstrated that Calvin's strong view of providence is not contradictory to our free choice, yet essential to it. This is hard to conceive because it is a different existential view than that with which we are familiar and a relationship that is unique to God and his human creations. Yet it holds in proper tension that which accords with the natural sensibilities of the Reformed Christian, namely the existence of free choice and the comprehensive providence of God.[70] In Part IV, I gave reasons why we should not equate moral good and spiritual good. Calvin himself offers compelling reasons for this. His teachings on the intellect are a clear indication that all humans, Christian or non-Christian, have (sub) faculties that have innate moral beliefs and convictions. This accords again with certain Biblical passages from Romans, as well as our own experiences with Christians and non-Christians in moral situations.

Calvin's understanding of our capacities and our existence teach Christians some valuable lessons in the ethical and pastoral realms. Although God ordains all things, we were not designed to sit back passively and enjoy the ride. As humans, God endowed us with moral capacities to uphold the natural law and treat one another well. As Christians, we are to proclaim the gospel, even though God is the only one that can regenerate an individual. Furthermore, discipline in civil and ecclesiastical situations are aimed at taking God's law seriously but also reforming the individual for the good of the person and the good of the community. Holding each other accountable says that God's law matters. Finally, dependence on God is vital for the Christian life. It is easier to act morally and graciously when we constantly remind ourselves that nothing is outside of God's plan or control.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The following translations are used throughout: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (translated by Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* (translated by Benjamin Wirt Farley; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982); John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, ed. A.N.S. Lane (translated by G.I. Davies; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (translated by J.K.S. Reid; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954); John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948-1960); John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Audubon: Old Paths Publications, 1995); John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism* (translated by Henry Cole; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950).

[2] There is not room in this paper to present a full blown inquiry into all of these nuanced philosophical issues. This definition of freedom is a presupposition of the paper. It is adapted from the works of Eric D'Arcy and Richard Swinburne. Eric D'Arcy, *Human Acts: An Essay in their Moral Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 87-88; Cf. Allen Verhey, "Introduction to Calvin's Treatise 'Against the Libertines.'" *Calvin Theological Journal 15* (1980), 203; Richard Swinburne, *Atonement and Responsibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 51.

[3] Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 81.

[4] Muller, *Dictionary*, 176-177.

[5] *The Westminster Larger Catechism* in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), Q's 101-150 [pp. 184-238]; Cf. *The Heidelberg Catechism* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1863), Q's 92-94 [pp. 231-239].

[6] The following works are the current scholarship that interprets Calvin in one or more of the three areas investigated in this essay: Paul Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Bielby & Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 161-189; Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Vincent Brümmer, "Calvin, Bernard and the Freedom of the Will." *Religious Studies 30* (1994), 437-455; A.N.S. Lane, "Did Calvin Believe in Freewill?," *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1981), 72-90; Willem Balke, "Calvin's Concept of Freedom" in *Freedom: Studies in Reformed Theology 1.*, ed. A. van Egmond (Baarn: Callenbach, 1996), 25-54; Allen Verhey, "Introduction to Calvin's Treatise 'Against the Libertines,'" *Calvin Theological Journal 15* (1980), 190-219; Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931); Randal Zachman, *The Testimony of the Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin: A Comparative Study* (Ann Arbor : UMI, 1997); Richard A. Muller, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius's Gambit and the Reformed Response," in *Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, vol. 2*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 252-278; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Nicholas H. Gootjes, "Calvin on Epicurus and Epicureans," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005), 33-48.

[7] Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," 161-164; Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 365. The reader is to note that most philosophical terms applied to Calvin such as compatibilist, libertarian, etc. are anachronistic. Other notable "compatibilistic Calvinists" are John Feinberg and Jonathan Edwards ("compatibilism" used with him is anachronistic as well). Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001); John Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 17-44.

[8] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 73ff.

[9] Muller, "Grace, Election," 252.

[10] E.g. Verhey, "Against the Libertines," 198; Balke, "Calvin's Concept of Freedom," 46. They follow Calvin in ascribing "moral" to actions that adhere to both tables of the Decalogue.

[11] This formula is in agreement with *The Heidelberg Catechism's* Q91: "But what are good works? Answer: Those only which are done from true faith, according to the Law of God, for His glory; and not such as rest on our own opinion, or the commandments of men" [p. 231].

[12] Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation*, § 279 [p. 67-68].

[13] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.8 [pp.169-170].

[14] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.3 [p. 164].
[15] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.7 [pp. 168-169]; Cf. Lane, "Did Calvin Believe," 73.
[16] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.8 [pp. 169-170].
[17] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.4, 26 [pp. 227, 245]; Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Q. 83, Art. 3, as referenced by Calvin.
[18] Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, § 280 [p. 68].
[19] Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, § 280 [p. 68-69].
[20] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.5 [pp. 253-255].
[21] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.6 [p. 228]; Cf. II.ii.25 [pp.243-245].
[22] Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*. Calvin demonstrates Pighius's misunderstandings of Calvin's writings in many places throughout this work.
[23] Lane, "Did Calvin Believe," 82; Muller, *Dictionary*, 134.
[24] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.6 [pp. 255-256]; Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, § 375 [pp. 205-206].
[25] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.6-10 [pp. 255-261].
[26] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.9 [p. 260].
[27] Brümmer clearly understands contingency according to the way the Reformers would have understood it.
[28] Brümmer, "Calvin and Bernard," 451-2; Cf pp. 440-441. There he is comfortable with moral responsibility without the ability not to sin.
[29] What Calvin says in regards to the saved sinning and the inner conceptual workings of that event is a further question that we do not have time to entertain here.
[30] Calvin, *Institutes*, I xv.8 [pp. 169-170]; Cf. II.v.14 [pp. 286-287]; III.iii.12-13 [pp. 518-519]; Calvin, *Commentary on . . . Philippians*, 2:13 [pp. 253-257]; Balke, "Calvin's Concept of Freedom," 46-47.
[31] Balke, "Calvin's Concept of Freedom," 30-31.
[32] Muller, *Dictionary*, 88.
[33] Cf. Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*; Calvin, *Treatises Against*; A contemporary example is: Harkness, *John Calvin*.
[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.1 [p. 172].
[35] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.2 [pp. 172-173].
[36] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.3 [p. 174].
[37] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.3 [p. 174].
[38] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.4 [p. 175]; Cf. I.xvi.5-7 [pp. 176-179]; Cf. Gootjes, "Calvin on Epicurus," 36-39.
[39] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.8 [p. 179].
[40] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.6 [p. 188-189]; Cf. I.xvii.8 [p. 180].
[41] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xviii.2 [p. 201].
[42] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.4 [p. 187].
[43] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xviii.1 [p. 198-200].
[44] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xviii.4 [pp. 203-205].

[45] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 74.
[46] Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 281. Calvin is citing Augustine in the second quote from an unknown writing.
[47] Muller, "Grace, Election," 267.
[48] Calvin, *Treatises Against*, 242-243; Cf. Verhey, "Calvin's Treatise," 208; Muller, "Grace, Election," 252.
[49] Verhey, "Calvin's Treatise," 203; Cf. Muller, "Grace, Election," 252, 267-270.
[50] Varieties of compatibilism that deny actual contingency are those such as Jonathan Edwards in *Freedom of the Will*, 21, and John Feinberg in *Predestination & Free Will*, 34-35. "Compatibilism" definitions offered by Paul Helm in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 161-164, and Terrance Tiessen in *Providence and Prayer*, 365, are broad enough so as to encompass Edwards' and Feinberg's compatibilism, Calvin's providential view, and surely others.
[51] This is one of the constantly reiterated themes of the *Institutes*. Cf. II.ii-iii [pp. 221-264]; especially II.ii.1 [pp. 222-224].
[52] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.12 [p. 233]; Cf. I.ii.25 [pp. 243-245] regarding the harm of the intellect.
[53] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.6, 11, 52 [pp. 320-321, 324-326, 357].
[54] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.1, 6, 8, 27 [pp. 222-224, 228-229, 229-230, and 245-247]; II.iii.2 [pp. 250-251].
[55] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.4 [p. 252]; Cf. II.viii.6 [pp. 320-321].
[56] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3 [p. 251].
[57] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.4 [pp.164-165]; II.ii.17 [pp. 237-238]; II.iii.3 [pp. 251-252]; Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 871-872; Cf. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice*, 78.
[58] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.6-7 [pp. 166-169].
[59] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.2, 13, 18 [pp. 224, 235, 238].
[60] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.18 [p. 238].
[61] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.18 [p. 238].
[62] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.16 [p. 664]; II.viii.1 [p. 317].
[63] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.13 [pp.234-235]; Cf. II.ii.15 [p. 236].
[64] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.5 [p. 320]; Cf. Zachman, *Testimony of the Conscience*, Chapter VII (on matters of the consciences of Christians).
[65] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.1 [p. 317].
[66] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.1 [pp. 40-41]; I.v.13, 15 [pp. 61-63]; Cf. Zachman, *Testimony of the Conscience*, 277-280.
[67] Calvin, *Treatises Against*, 251-252.
[68] Cf. Calvin, *Commentary . . . on Romans*, 7:25 [p. 155].
[69] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 5.
[70] Cf. *The Westminster Confession*, 3.1 [p. 28], 5.2 [p.34].