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# John Calvin's Concept of Divine Accommodation: A Hermeneutical Corrective

Michael Tinker

## 1. Introduction

Basil Mitchell, writing in 1980,<sup>1</sup> notes that, until recently, the idea ‘that Christianity needs—and, indeed, possesses—a divine revelation...have been regarded as a theological commonplace’.<sup>2</sup> Not only would such a revelation from God further evidence his existence, but also ‘there is an obvious gap in a form of theism in which God, having made a world of rational creatures able to love and worship him, did not in some way communicate with them’.<sup>3</sup>

Although some would dispute this, Mitchell asserts that for there to be any basis for a *Christian* theology, the theologian must credit the biblical writers with ‘a high degree of religious insight’.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell continues: ‘Unless he does so, he has no warrant for attaching supreme importance to the events whose almost sole witnesses and interpreters they are.’<sup>5</sup> If we agree with this premise, argues Mitchell, we must then consider the fact that ‘these writers themselves, with considerable unanimity, agree in ascribing their religious insight to the grace of God’.<sup>6</sup>

‘If they indeed possess the degree of religious insight which must be ascribed to them by anyone who wants to take their message seriously, they ought not to be held mistaken in *this* belief, unless for very good reason.’<sup>7</sup> We do not have the space here to fully engage with Mitchell’s argument, but for the practical purposes of this paper we will take it as a given that the biblical picture of God is of a being who actively seeks to communicate with his creation.<sup>8</sup>

However, problems immediately arise once this ‘given’ is established. First, we must ask the question, *how* does a creator God communicate with his creation? Further, how can this be done *effectively* without the truth of what is seeking to be communicated being compromised? This problem is made more acute by the epistemological gap that appears to exist between man and God.<sup>9</sup>

Mitchell notes that for the Christian theologian, the basis for his theology

comes through the Bible. This again raises problems. Even if we grant that the biblical writers were not merely ‘extending the boundaries of man’s religious consciousness by their own effort’,<sup>10</sup> but were in fact ‘instruments of the Holy Spirit’,<sup>11</sup> much of what they write appears to be caught up in the culture within which it was written. For instance, a cursory glance at some of the laws in the Old Testament will show how ‘irrelevant’ they appear to be to the modern, western, reader; after all, how many of us have issues with our neighbours ox?

We are therefore left with the question, not simply ‘how did God communicate with his people *then*?’ but ‘how does God communicate with us *now*?’ Or, since we are taking the Bible as the *locus* of revelation, the question is not simply ‘what *did* a passage mean to the first readers’, but ‘what *does* it mean to readers today?’

The problem is made more prominent by the rise of the school of ‘cultural relativism’, which in its most extreme form views the texts of Scripture as so culturally bound as to have no significant meaning today. So James Barr writes, ‘The problems of our own time are very different from those of biblical times; how then can material from that very different biblical situation be decisive for our problems?’<sup>12</sup>

Reader–response criticism takes this issue to another level. Not only is there the distance between the people and times of the Bible and ourselves, but we now have the added problem that we are not ‘innocent interpreters’.<sup>13</sup> We bring all sorts of ‘baggage’ to our reading of a text—‘All readings are situated in particular sociopolitical contexts and involve a struggle for power....’<sup>14</sup> The *Post Modern Bible* states that all our discourse about what a text means ‘are inseparable from what we *want* it to mean, from how we *will* it to mean’.<sup>15</sup>

Jacques Derrida, in his declaration of the death of the author, plunged the problem to even greater depths. Not only are we distanced from the past (cultural relativism), but the text, in fact, has no determinate meaning to bring to the present at all (semantic relativism).<sup>16</sup> Writing, according to Derrida, is an ‘endlessly shifting play of signs that are empty and infinitely changing’.<sup>17</sup> Thus, even if we found a way to understand what was said in the past, there is nothing to actually cling onto, *hermeneutically*, since the meaning is constantly changing as it enters new contexts.

Laying aside the issues of semantic relativism for the moment,<sup>18</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer notes the problem raised by the clear fact that whatever our theories are on the nature of the author or the reader, we *are* certainly distanced from the original writers by time and context though, of course, to varying degrees.<sup>19</sup> However, although he recognises the problem, he does not come to quite so pessimistic a view as Barr; instead he proposes a solution, namely, hermeneutical study. He writes—

The distance between past and present has to be spanned in both directions: I have to be able to get back to the past in order to exegete, but the past has got to be able to get to the present in order to be relevant. Hermeneutics is the bridge between past and present, between 'what it meant' and 'what it means', between 'meaning' and 'significance'.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously not every hermeneutical tool and method can be examined here. It is the purpose of this study to examine one particular tool, that of 'divine accommodation'. When understood not in isolation but in the context of a more recent advancement in hermeneutical studies, namely 'speech-act theory', we believe this tool will help in the quest to bridge the epistemological gap between ourselves and God.

Although the idea of divine accommodation is used extensively by John Calvin (1509–61), whose use of this concept will provide the focus of our study, the idea by no means originated with him. We find examples of it in Tertullian, Origen, and in writing as early as that of Clement of Alexandria (150-215).<sup>21</sup> However, for our purposes, Calvin provides the fullest application of accommodation in his hermeneutical studies. He also lived at a time of great change, both in the Church and in the scientific world, a time not dissimilar to our own.<sup>22</sup> Thus his writing and thought is of great relevance in the task of building the hermeneutical bridge from the past to the present.

Many react to the problem posed by this 'gap' in different ways. We have already seen how some react by denying any significant revelation from God through the Bible today.<sup>23</sup> Others, bypassing the culturally relative areas of the Bible, will focus on 'universals'; the danger of this being that Scripture becomes less, rather than more, relevant as it is abstracted.<sup>24</sup> We believe that the idea of divine accommodation provides an important basis for a modern hermeneutic,

which, whilst admitting of the culturally relative nature of Scripture, shows us how the Bible is still revelatory and relevant to today.

## 2. A Preliminary Clarification

There is one point that needs to be clarified before we can proceed with the investigation before us, that is, regarding the *nature* of ‘divine accommodation’ in Calvin’s thought.

A surface understanding of the issue may lead one to refer to divine accommodation as a theory or even a doctrine. The problem with these terms is that nowhere does Calvin explicitly set it down as such, nor does he develop the idea in any systematic way. It has been suggested, most notably by Ford Lewis Battles,<sup>25</sup> that the idea of accommodation is a ‘principle’ linked to the art of rhetoric. David F. Wright notes that this is too narrow a definition of accommodation, as we shall see below.<sup>26</sup> The idea of accommodation found in Calvin does not seem to have the kind of rules attached to it by which one could recognise its use, as one would expect to see in regard to the use of allegory or the like, although some principles are indeed recognisable. It therefore seems better to refer to divine accommodation, in Calvin’s usage, as an *exegetical* tool.<sup>27</sup> This way we do justice to the fact that in Calvin this idea is really an assumption and is *used* by Calvin to illuminate and explain Scripture, rather than it being something that is itself illumined by explanation. Due to the fact that Calvin does not set the idea of accommodation down in any systematic form, we must take the same approach as Dr. Jon Balsarak in his thesis on the subject, agreeing that ‘it would appear that an examination of *usage* rather than *principles* will be a more fruitful way of approaching this study’.<sup>28</sup> Some systematising of the concept of divine accommodation will be inevitable; however, we have endeavoured to examine accommodation as much in the light of its usage as we could. Due to this there will be some overlapping and recapitulation of themes which mirrors Calvin’s own style of theology.

## 3. Nature of the Institutes

Before writing any of his commentaries on the Bible, Calvin set about writing *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, first published in 1536. Since it was Calvin’s starting point it shall also be ours. He wrote it with the purpose of setting forth doctrines so as not to have to digress too much in later commentaries, that is, if he were to write any.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin feels it is the duty of the more learned to help unlearned Christians understand what God has to teach them: 'Now that cannot be better done through the Scripture than to treat the chief and weightiest matters comprised in the Christian philosophy.'<sup>30</sup> He goes on '...it is very necessary to help in this way those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation. Consequently, I was constrained, according to the ability that the Lord gave me, to undertake this task'.<sup>31</sup>

Calvin expected the readers of his commentaries to have also read the *Institutes* and thus have the background knowledge of the basic Christian doctrines so as to have a framework within which to understand the Bible: '...I can at least promise that [the *Institutes*] can be a key to open a way for all children of God into good and right understanding of Holy Scripture.'<sup>32</sup> Since the notion of divine accommodation is a tool for understanding Scripture, we need to look at some of the doctrines *behind* this notion, as set out by Calvin; understanding the *framework* in order to see its *application* in illuminating the meaning of Scripture.

#### 4. The Nature of Scripture

Calvin believed that Scripture was to be understood as the 'everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth'.<sup>33</sup> The Word of God is not to be understood like a human word that is a fleeting movement of air, but rather it emanates from the very person of God himself.

If this is the nature of Scripture, then Calvin is very keen to hold it together as a unity, dismissing none of it as a mistake or error but treating it all as the very Word of God; God revealing himself as God. Thus, when faced with issues of apparent contradiction, Calvin can appeal to other parts of Scripture to validate and interpret the problematic passage (cf. *Inst.* I.xiv.3, *Inst.* I.xvii.12). Later we will see in more detail how this principle works itself out. What is important at this juncture is to see that Calvin assumes that Scripture is a unity and thus one part can be appealed to in order to explain or validate another.

#### 5. The Nature of Truth

Another assumption that Calvin makes which provides the backdrop for his use of the tool of divine accommodation in his hermeneutic, is the notion of 'common grace'. This is the belief that the truth of God is revealed in all sorts

of places, albeit to varying degrees.<sup>34</sup> Saving truth, for Calvin, is of course ultimately found in Scripture, for reasons we shall see, but truth about God can also be found in nature. So in *Inst.* I.v.2 Calvin is highly praising of the scientific arts—

To be sure, there is need of art and of more exacting toil in order to investigate the motion of the stars, to determine their assigned stations, to measure their intervals, to note their properties. As God's providence shows itself more explicitly when one observes these, so the mind must rise to a somewhat higher level to look upon his glory....For [the excellence of divine art] reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host.

Calvin does not think much of those who would spend their time attempting 'with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of [God's] essence'<sup>35</sup> arguing instead that all we need do is look around us at the wonderful works of his hands. As a result, he is keen to use the liberal arts to help us understand the works of God more fully, warning that 'if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths'.<sup>36</sup>

## 6. The Nature of God

Having laid these two foundations as a basis for Calvin's framework in the *Institutes* let us return to Calvin's starting point, that which we find at the beginning of the *Institutes*, namely, the *knowledge of God*. It is interesting to note that, whereas other systematic theologians may start by defining God or the Bible,<sup>37</sup> Calvin begins by asking the epistemological question of how one can *know* God. For Calvin this is the topic of fundamental importance in theology. He claims that if we really want to know ourselves we cannot do so without knowledge of God. The idea that knowledge of self necessitates knowledge of God is the central theme of the first book of the *Institutes*. Having established that this is fundamental, Calvin starts to investigate who both God and man are in relation to each other.

It is an assumption of Calvin's that God is of such a magnitude that he is far above us. So he says in *Inst.* I.xiii.1: 'Surely, his infinity ought to make us afraid to try to measure him by our own senses.'<sup>38</sup> It is hard to show exactly why Calvin asserts this as he does not feel the need to explain it. It is an

undercurrent of all his writing on God. We see this again in his commentary on Genesis where he writes, in a form that certainly seems logical to himself, that 'since [God] is in himself incomprehensible...'.<sup>39</sup> In *Inst.* I.xvii.13 Calvin states that our weakness cannot reach *his height*.<sup>40</sup> He writes similarly in his commentary on the Psalms that God fits 'both heaven and earth' and thus 'we cannot attain to that infinite height to which he is exalted'.<sup>41</sup> For Calvin, the way God presents himself in the Old Testament, as a pillar of smoke, a cloud or flame, 'clearly told men of his incomprehensible essence'.<sup>42</sup> This is further made apparent in Calvin's discussion of Ezekiel's vision in his commentary on Ezekiel 1:28. For man to comprehend God 'as he is' would be, says Calvin, 'to measure with the palm of our hands a hundred thousand heavens, and earths, and worlds. For God is infinite; and when the heavens of heavens cannot contain him, how can our minds comprehend him?'<sup>43</sup> We therefore see something of the greatness of God's nature, indicates Calvin, in the reaction of the prophets when confronted with God. They are 'justly overwhelmed' by God's majesty.<sup>44</sup>

In a more subtle area, as John T. McNeill rightly points out in his edition of the *Institutes*, the very title of Book 1, 'knowledge of God the *Creator*', indicates Calvin's assumption that God is far too vast for us to know him 'as he is in himself',<sup>45</sup> and instead is known through his works (including, of course, his Word) and what he reveals to us in them.<sup>46</sup> All in all, says Calvin, 'the glory of God, when we contemplate it alone, can produce no other effect than to fill us with despair; so awful is his throne'.<sup>47</sup>

## 7. The Nature of Man

Man, in contrast to God, is small and weak. This, too, seems to be an assumption in the thought of Calvin. Even pre-fall man is in this state; the fall only extenuates this contrast. Before the fall, even though there was no rebellion, man was still finite and needed God to come to his level in order to communicate with him; there was already what John Hick calls 'epistemic distance' between man and God.<sup>48</sup>

However, there is now the added problem created by our rebellion against God which has also resulted in spiritual blindness, that is, there is a noetic effect of the 'fall'. As a result, Calvin concludes that if we were to try and 'measure our reason by God's law...we shall find in how many respects it is blind!'<sup>49</sup>



When God takes away his Word, that is his revelation of Truth, and leaves us to our own devices, we ‘falsely gather that we have some power of free will for [God] to observe and test’. God does this to ‘compel us to recognise our own nothingness’.<sup>50</sup> However, in our ignorance and weakness we do not recognise our weakness, but instead think ourselves something when we are nothing in comparison to God. Our weak and proud state not only means that when we are left alone we stumble, but that even when presented with the truth we reject it: ‘...our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God; and it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God’s truth.’<sup>51</sup>

Calvin sees this worked out in the act of salvation by faith. He notes that some consider it paradoxical that we cannot believe unless faith is granted to us. However, this just goes to prove the point. Men, says Calvin, ‘do not consider either how secret and lofty the heavenly wisdom is, or how very dull [they] are to perceive the mysteries of God’.<sup>52</sup> He is so vast, and humans are so far below him, that belief and assent to God is no mean thing; in fact, as things stand, it is impossible.

This weakness is also expressed in that there is nothing in man to attract God to him:<sup>53</sup> ‘For the blindness under which [people] labour is almost always mixed with proud vanity and obstinacy.’<sup>54</sup> This, notes Calvin, is shown by the observation that men cannot seem to rise above themselves, but instead, measure God by ‘the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity...’.<sup>55</sup> Man’s position is poor. Any contact with God cannot come from the initiative of man, for man is incapable of rising above himself to God’s great height.

### **8. Necessity of Accommodation**

The above account of Calvin’s understanding of God and man, and the vast chasm between the two, both the metaphysical and moral ‘gap’, intimates the necessity of divine accommodation. If God is infinite and we are finite, if God is outside of time and we are bound by time, if it is impossible to reach God’s great height by ourselves, yet if God wishes to communicate with his creation, God must, of necessity, lower himself to our level so that we can come to know him personally.

Calvin likens this divine ‘descent’ to the way a nurse will speak to a child,<sup>56</sup>

condescending to our 'ignorance' and thus 'prattling to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style'.<sup>57</sup> Some interpret this way of speaking as perfectly representing God, and thus 'yield less reverence to God'.<sup>58</sup> However, they fail to recognise that it is due to *our* nature and *our* ignorance that God must lower himself in this way.

This point is further elaborated when Calvin comments on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Here Jesus points out that, even though he has been speaking in earthly terms, Nicodemus still does not understand. How then would Nicodemus ever understand if he were to speak in heavenly language? The same, Calvin wants to show, holds true for the rest of Scripture, not just Jesus' words on earth. It appears that men are wont to desire teaching in 'an ingenious and witty style'<sup>59</sup> and thus spurn the Scriptures for their 'rough and popular style'. However, Scripture is written in this way so that all may understand it. Commenting on Genesis 1:16, Calvin writes: 'Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand....'<sup>60</sup> He talks of Scripture as a 'common school for all'<sup>61</sup> thus, although 'the truths of revelation are so high as to exceed our comprehension', the Holy Spirit 'has accommodated them so far to our capacity, as to render all Scripture profitable for instruction'.<sup>62</sup>

We see the same logic repeatedly throughout Calvin's thought, namely that—

1. Man does not have the capacity to know God as he is in himself.
2. Scripture talks about God communicating with Man and Man understanding something of God.
3. Therefore God must have lowered himself to man's capacity.

Another example of this logic can be seen in Calvin's commentary on Isaiah 6:1<sup>63</sup> where God is described in physical terms. Calvin notes, as a given, that 'the understandings of men cannot rise to [God's] boundless height'.<sup>64</sup> If this is so, how then can he be described physically, if at all? Calvin writes that God never 'appeared such as he actually is, but such as the capacity of men could receive'.<sup>65</sup>

We are not to infer from this, however, that God appearing in this way is simply an illusion; that we know nothing of God, since God 'does not appear as he actually is'.<sup>66</sup> Rather he appears in a way we can comprehend, but *also* in 'a manner as to cause some kind of mirror to reflect the rays of his glory'.<sup>67</sup>

This latter point must be made clear if we are to understand Calvin's thinking on this subject. Although it is impossible for us to see God as he actually is, due to the nature of God and the nature of man, we can still know *something* of God if he reveals it in a way that we can understand. An illustration which is taken up from Calvin may help. In talking to a child we may speak in a way that does not express things 'as they are in themselves', but in a way that still conveys truth about those things. It may be that when trying to explain to a child that someone has died we do not explain all the scientific reasoning behind their death, explaining the spread of the cancer and how it destroyed other cells, or whatever the fatal illness may have entailed. We may not even use the word 'death' as they probably won't have the capacity to understand the word. Rather we may talk of somebody 'leaving'. Although this does not explain everything about death it does help the child understand the truth that the person is no longer physically present. Such ways of talking about death do not explain everything about the event, they do not explain the event in all its truth, however they convey sufficient truth, tailored to the recipient's capacity, for that recipient to understand what is happening, however limited that understanding is.

An everyday example may go to show that adults also do this, when speaking to each other. We speak in ways that are not altogether 'true' scientifically, and yet what we say does convey some truth that is useful. Many will, without hesitation, talk of sunrise and sunset. Most people know that this is not true, *scientifically*. We know that, in reality, the earth revolves around the sun due to the gravitational pull of the sun and at the same time the earth revolves on its own axis, etc. Then why do we still talk of 'sunrise' if it is, in fact, untrue? We still speak of it because, despite being 'untrue', it still conveys *some* truths, namely that we see the sun 'rise' and 'set' each day. It thus conveys truths of *appearance* that are helpful in daily conversation (it helps us describe when it will get light or dark each day) whilst it remains untrue scientifically.

Accommodation by God means that we will never have exhaustive knowledge about divine matters. Such exhaustive knowledge would necessitate omniscience on our part, which we do not have. However, this does not mean that we cannot have *any* knowledge. The knowledge we do have and are given through God accommodating himself to our level, is not exhaustive knowledge but nonetheless is sufficient knowledge—we can know *truly* without knowing *extensively*.

### 9. Knowledge of God in Nature

One of the chief ways that we can know of God, says Calvin, is through nature. This mode of revelation is open to all as all experience the created world. 'Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order...[is] for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.'<sup>68</sup>

Again, Calvin writes, '[e]ven the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host.'<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately this knowledge cannot bring us to know God in relationship as '[w]hat soul, relying upon natural perception, ever had an inkling that the lawful worship of God consists in these and like matters (Ex. 20:3-17)?'<sup>70</sup> Rather, 'It is more than enough if their understanding extends so far that evasion becomes impossible for them, and they, convicted by the witness of their own conscience, begin even now to tremble before God's judgment seat.'<sup>71</sup>

### 10. The Problem Extenuated by Sin

Adam's rebellion against God, in what is known as 'the fall', meant that natural revelation was no longer sufficient to impart knowledge of God to mankind. Previously Adam, claims Calvin, could have known God through natural revelation alone, through God accommodating himself in nature to man's understanding.<sup>72</sup>

However, we are now all in a state of separation from God because of Adam's rejection of God and our own rejection of God. This results in a twofold need for divine accommodation. It is not only needed for us to know anything of God *intellectually* (cognitive), but also to know God *personally* (relational). We need to be reunited with God. However, we cannot possibly 'reach up to his height' to initiate this reunion. For this reason Calvin puts forward the idea of *descent* and *ascent*.

For Man to be in relationship with God he must ascend to be with God. At present the gulf which separates us is not one of lack of understanding God; if that were so we would simply need God to teach us, admittedly in a way that

we can understand. However this does not seem to be the dominant theme in Scripture. Instead we encounter in the Bible, as a prevailing motif, *Heilgeschichte*; that is, God interacting, saving people and bringing them into a relationship with himself. For this to happen we must ascend to him to be with him. Thus God lowers himself, in Christ, not simply that we may stay at our level but that he may bring us up to his.<sup>73</sup>

This is seen most notably in Calvin's teaching on the Lord's Supper. He talks of us being 'lifted up' to be united with Christ as we eat of his body. This is one of the central themes in Calvin's teaching on salvation, and is termed the 'mystical union'. Unless we are united with Christ we cannot benefit from his action in dying and rising again. However, Christ must first descend to our level in order to raise us up in union with him.

### 11. Knowledge of God in Scripture and the Incarnation

This brings us to the most outstanding example of divine accommodation in Calvin's thought—the Incarnation. Again this is accommodation of necessity. If we are to truly *know* God *salvifically*,<sup>74</sup> we must be united with him. We cannot be united with him unless he first comes to us, since it is impossible for us to reach up to him, as we have already seen. Calvin writes: 'certainly for this reason Christ descended to us, to bear us up to the Father, and at the same time to bear us up to himself, inasmuch as he is one with the Father.'<sup>75</sup>

Elsewhere Calvin talks of an exchange taking place in the incarnation, that God, by becoming 'Son of man with us' has 'made us sons of God with him', that his descent to earth has 'prepared an ascent to heaven for us'.<sup>76</sup> Whilst this was the purpose of the incarnation, Jesus at the same time reveals the Father to us; that is, it is not as if he unites us with him without any *knowledge* of God being imparted through him. In fact, Calvin believes that 'all that [God] had to reveal' about himself was in Christ; Christ is the 'true image of [the Father's] glory'.<sup>77</sup>

If we want to 'attain the knowledge of God' we should simply look to 'that eternal Wisdom'<sup>78</sup> who is Jesus. It is to Jesus that all the secrets of the Father are revealed and so it is to him that we should turn for knowledge of the Father.<sup>79</sup> In fact, so necessary is knowledge of Jesus for knowledge of God that 'he who forms a conception of God without Christ takes away the half of him'.<sup>80</sup>

Tied up with knowledge of Christ is knowledge of Scripture, for where else can we find Jesus? '...for they who imagine whatever they choose concerning Christ will ultimately have nothing instead of him but a shadowy phantom.'<sup>81</sup> All in all it would seem that 'there is no knowledge of God which is unaccommodated, whether it comes from nature or Scripture'.<sup>82</sup>

## 12. The Wisdom of Acceptance

If this is the case then it is true wisdom, states Calvin, to accept this fact. Knowledge of God can only come when we realise our frailty, accept God's chosen method of communication and listen to him. Then we can truly know God. So Calvin says: 'this is to be truly wise, when we embrace God in the manner in which he accommodates himself to our capacity.'<sup>83</sup> In summary he writes: 'Therefore let us willingly enclosed within these bounds to which God has willed to confine us, and as it were, pen up our minds that they may not, through their very freedom to wander, go astray.'<sup>84</sup> With this is mind, let us move onto the next section of this study and look at how this tool is used by Calvin in understanding the Bible in his contemporary context.

## 13. Describing God

Due to the fact that God is infinite and we are finite, it is impossible for us to comprehend God 'as he is in himself'; man does not have the capacity to understand him due to his, and man's, very nature. Thus we find that, when God is described, he is not described as 'he actually is'<sup>85</sup> because 'the understandings of men cannot rise to his boundless height'.<sup>86</sup> Instead God is described 'as the capacity of men could receive'.<sup>87</sup> What is communicated to man, when God appears to him, is 'some kind of mirror to reflect the rays of [God's] glory'.<sup>88</sup> What is inconceivable to man, that is the majesty of God, is perceived, but only according to the perceiver's capacity. Hence, in the case of Isaiah 6, a throne and robe and bodily appearance are all attributed to God. God does not necessarily have all of these attributes, but they are the form that God takes in order to communicate what otherwise would be incommunicable.

We find the same idea in Calvin's commentary of Ezekiel 1:28. Here Ezekiel says it explicitly himself: 'this was a vision of the likeness of the glory of Jehovah'.<sup>89</sup> The appearance was, again, not one of God 'as he is in himself', but as man can comprehend him: 'For God is infinite; and when the heavens of heavens cannot contain him, how can our minds comprehend him?'<sup>90</sup> God

is infinite, we are finite and thus do not have the capacity to see God as he is in himself.

It is important to note here that Calvin attributes full control to God over the manner of accommodation that is used here. For Calvin, God still has control over how much he reveals, although there is a certain restriction because of our capacity for understanding. So he writes, ‘...God manifests himself familiarly to all his servants, *yet so as not to foster our curiosity*, to which mankind are far too inclined.’<sup>91</sup> God can accommodate himself, not only with regard to our capacity for understanding, but also with regard to our tendency for ‘curiosity’. We tend to want more or, as Calvin puts it, the desire of mankind is always immoderate. God, however, knows what we can bear and also what will be healthy for us, and thus accommodates himself accordingly.

#### 14. Describing God’s actions

We find in Calvin that it is not only God as he appears that is accommodated to man’s capacity, but that descriptions of God’s actions are also accommodated to man’s capacity. The logic again flows from the nature of God and man. If God is infinite and thus acts outside of time, but also interacts with man who is finite and thus acts within time, how can such action be described? We surely cannot describe it as it really is, that is outside of time, as we are time-bound and so do not have the capacity to understand timeless action. For man to comprehend the action of a timeless God within time, the action must be described as time-bound.<sup>92</sup> So with regard to the issue of God ‘repenting’ of his actions, by implication ‘changing’ within time, Calvin writes: ‘Because our weakness cannot reach [God’s] height, any description which we receive of him must be lowered to our capacity in order to be intelligible. And the mode of lowering is to represent him not as he really is, but as we conceive of him [or “as he seems to us”].’<sup>93</sup>

Those following Calvin at this point<sup>94</sup> would argue that ‘repentance’ cannot mean that God has changed in the same way that men change (i.e., with regret) when they ‘repent’, as God is incapable of such change. Rather ‘the same term applied to God simply means that his procedure is changed. In the meantime, there is no inversion of his counsel or will, no change of his affection’.<sup>95</sup> To man within time this change in procedure looks like ‘repentance’, but to God who is outside of time there is no change involved: ‘What from eternity he had

foreseen, approved, decreed, he prosecutes with unvarying uniformity, how sudden so ever to the eye of man the variation may seem to be.<sup>96</sup> As Helm writes, such language is 'language that records the appearance of things in an unpedantic and vivid way'.<sup>97</sup>

Again this idea is picked up elsewhere, for instance in Calvin's commentary on Hosea 11:8-9. Here God is talked of as having a change of heart and that his *repentings were brought back again*.<sup>98</sup> Calvin asserts that '[God] cannot be touched with repentance, and his heart cannot undergo changes'.<sup>99</sup> To say that God does change, according to Calvin, would be to be guilty of impiety. Instead 'the same mode of speaking after the manner of men is adopted'.<sup>100</sup> The purpose of using this language here, according to Calvin, is to show that what the Israelites *deserve* is the same as 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. Rather, like a father who, even though he sees his son's 'wicked disposition', cannot forget that he is a father and so is inclined to spare him: 'God then declares that he would thus deal with his people.'<sup>101</sup> By using this imagery of a father, he necessarily introduces ideas of change of mind that are natural to us. However, these changes are not to be attributed to God. Rather the use of this language is meant to move the Israelites to understand what their sins deserve and the mercy given to them.

Calvin goes on to talk in a similar manner regarding the language of God's wrath towards the Israelites. He writes, 'For it must ever be remembered, that God is exempt from every passion.'<sup>102</sup> Thus the emotion of anger cannot be attributed to God. Why then does he talk of 'executing the fury of [his] wrath'? God speaks in this way so that, just as previously with talk of repentance, man can understand his mercy. With talk of fury man can understand the judgement he deserves; by this figurative mode of speaking God 'sets forth the punishment which was suitable to the sins of men'.<sup>103</sup>

The problem seems to be that we do not 'apprehend God's indignation' towards sins unless we see them provoke him to anger. 'Then God, with regard to our perception, calls fury of his wrath the heavy judgement, which is equal to, or meet for, our sins.'<sup>104</sup> Again we see here God's complete control over the act of accommodation. He not only accommodates to our capacity for understanding but also to our individual (here the nation of Israel's) tendencies to particular perceptions.



## 15. Relationship with God

Another area that the tool of accommodation is used in understanding Scripture is in regards to relationship with God. We have already seen how the Incarnation is the supreme act of condescension by God, and by this act of descending God is able to raise man up to be in ‘union’ with himself.<sup>105</sup> So Calvin writes, ‘...in proportion as [Jesus] comes near to us, we may more cheerfully approach to him, that he may raise us to his heavenly glory.’<sup>106</sup> This condescension in order to bring us into union with Christ is further played out in some other areas of doctrine. For our purposes it will suffice to look at Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper as an example.

The notion of ‘Union with Christ’ is essential for understanding Calvin’s theology of the Supper. For Calvin, without union with Christ we cannot receive any benefits from his death and resurrection. Thus, if the Lord’s Supper is to benefit the believer in any way he must have union with Christ through it. So Calvin writes ‘...because the blessings of Jesus Christ do not at all belong to us, unless he first be ours, it is necessary in the first place that he be given us in the Supper, so that the things which we have mentioned be really accomplished in us’.<sup>107</sup>

For Christ to be truly ours in the Supper he must be really present, not by consubstantiation as Luther puts forward, nor by transubstantiation as the Tridentine Catholic Church holds; nonetheless there must be a *real presence*. Thus Christ accommodates himself to us in the Lord’s Supper that we might be united with him. Just as when confronting the prophets God veils himself within visible forms so that man can comprehend God, so in the Lord’s Supper, Christ is veiled within the visible form of the bread and wine and is truly communicated to man in order that man might be united with him. Wallace sums this process up as a ‘veiling and an unveiling’.<sup>108</sup> The reason that God has to condescend to our level in this way, using the visible forms of the bread and wine as opposed to simply by the preaching of the Word, is this—

For seeing we are so foolish, that we cannot receive him with true confidence of heart, when he is presented by simple teaching and preaching, the Father, of his mercy, not at all disdaining to condescend in this matter to our infirmity, has desired to attach to his Word a visible sign, by which he represents the substance of his promises, to confirm and fortify us, and deliver us from all doubt and uncertainty.<sup>109</sup>

In the Supper we therefore find God condescending to man's level, veiling himself within the visible form of the bread and wine, in order to unveil himself and unite us with Christ. It is not simply an unveiling of intellectual knowledge but of true knowledge, that is, relationship.<sup>110</sup>

### 16. Accommodation in the Old Testament: The Sacrificial System

Let us now turn to examples of accommodation as seen in the *form* that worship was to take in the Old Testament. David F. Wright, arguing against Ford Lewis Battles'<sup>111</sup> evaluation that divine accommodation in Calvin is merely a rhetorical tool, points out that there are many outworkings of accommodation in the Bible.<sup>112</sup> A notable example is that of accommodation in the institution of the sacrificial system of the Israelites. Here God appears to accommodate himself to the practices of the people around his own. According to Wright, God tempers his law to the barbarity of his people.<sup>113</sup> That is, it would have been normal practice in that culture to desire to sacrifice to the gods. Since Israel was surrounded by this practice and would have felt it normal to express worship in such a way, the LORD has them sacrifice to *him*. He thus brings the practices of these ancient people to focus on himself and thus helping them to keep the first commandment.

It must be noted, though, that the LORD does not accommodate himself to *all* practices associated with the ancient sacrificial cults. For instance, he will not allow child sacrifice which seemed to have been a practice of the Canaanite people (Deut. 18:10). Again, when the Israelites decide to make a golden calf to worship, they claim they are worshipping the LORD (Ex. 32:5). However, the LORD does not see the 'revelry' in which they indulge as directed towards him, but to their 'gods' (v. 4, 8). We see here that God does not accommodate himself to the practice of making idols to be the focus of worship.

There are many other examples within the framework of worship among the ancient people of the Near East that God does not accommodate himself to, such as witchcraft and divination (Deut. 18:10ff), yet there are others, as we have seen, that God *does* accommodate himself to. His accommodation to some but not all practices is by no mean arbitrary but reflects his nature as God; he deplores the shedding of human blood in sacrifices but is so holy as to demand animal sacrifice to appease his wrath.

### 17. The Temple Cult

We find similar examples of accommodation with regard to the place of worship in ancient Israel. Calvin writes with regard to Genesis 35:7 where Jacob builds an altar for the LORD: ‘For although God is worshipped with the mind, yet an external confession is the inseparable companion of faith.’<sup>114</sup> This is very similar to what Calvin says regarding the Lord’s Supper that, although the reality is spiritual, it is because of our weakness that God lowers himself to use physical symbols.<sup>115</sup> God, knowing our frailty allows us to express our worship in ways akin to ‘stammering’. Jacob, by divine command, calls the place ‘the house of God’. Some consider Jacob, according to Calvin, too familiar in saying this. Indeed, as Calvin says elsewhere, even the heaven of heavens cannot hold him,<sup>116</sup> how then could we call one place ‘the house of God’?

Here we identify the problem with the text. God does not dwell in houses made by men (cf. 2 Sam. 7:6),<sup>117</sup> yet here this place is called ‘the house of God’. The resolution comes when we view this type of language and interaction as an example of divine accommodation: ‘when God descends to us, he, in a certain sense, abases himself, and stammers with us, so he allows us to stammer with him.’<sup>118</sup> This stammering is deemed ‘acceptable to God’ because it is given ‘by a celestial oracle’.

However it is with this last point in mind that Calvin gives a strong warning against misunderstanding this idea: ‘For where the living voice of God does not sound, whatever pomps may be introduced will be like shadowy spectres; as in the Papacy nothing can be seen except bladders filled with wind.’<sup>119</sup> Thus again we see that accommodation is done by God, not man—he decrees what is acceptable to him, and to try and dream up other earthly ways of showing worship, not revealed to us by God, is useless.

Other examples of this form of accommodation can be seen in areas such as the Ark of the Covenant<sup>120</sup> and also the Tabernacle, but we will not go into these in detail here. What is clear, from this brief study, is that God has accommodated himself to the weaknesses of man to enable him to worship in ways not dissimilar to other peoples. The people are never to go beyond the boundaries of what God has ordained as acceptable; this ‘humility of faith is praiseworthy’ that we ‘confine [ourselves] within the divinely prescribed bounds’.<sup>121</sup>

### 18. Accommodation in Ethical Decisions

Another interesting example of divine accommodation in action is that of the various ethical decisions made in Scripture that, although sin has been committed in making them, they are not condemned but rather, in some cases, they are praised.<sup>122</sup>

An example is Joshua 2:6-7. Rahab lies to protect the Israelite spies, yet she is essentially rewarded for her protection of them, with a promise that she and her family will be spared when the Israelites return to take the city.<sup>123</sup> A similar example is found in Exodus 1:19. Here the two Hebrew midwives lie about the reason for the survival of the Hebrew babies. Yet God 'was kind to the midwives...'.<sup>124</sup> Herein lies the problem; both of these examples involve people lying, which is clearly against the character of God and by implication against the way his people should live. Calvin cannot altogether excuse a 'dutiful lie', as these two seem to be. Rather (in regard to Rahab's lie) '...we must admit that though it was done for a good purpose, it was not free from fault...because that cannot be right which is contrary to the nature of God.'<sup>125</sup> Yet they are rewarded for what they did, or at the very least the sin is not condemned.

The problem is extenuated by two false conclusions that may be drawn from these episodes. First, Calvin argues that we should by no means infer from this that God condones the action of lying. Rather, although 'it was the will of God that the spies should be delivered...he did not approve of saving their life by falsehood.'<sup>126</sup> Likewise, in regards to the Hebrew midwives, Calvin writes: '...we cannot praise the cunning and the deceit, by which the whole action would have been vitiated, had not the gratuitous mercy of God interposed.'<sup>127</sup>

Secondly we should not try to explain away their deceit as if it was not sinful: '...superstitious zeal must be avoided in covering their faults, since this would often infringe on the direct authority of Scripture.'<sup>128</sup> If we look at these examples through the lenses of accommodation, however, we may be able to see how this problem can be resolved. It seems that God recognises that all human action tends to involve some measure of sin because of our nature. As Balserak notes, commenting on Calvin's thought, there 'is no work so pure that it is absolutely free from stain'.<sup>129</sup> However God is able to accommodate his response, not always condemning now (though it seems all sin will one day be called to account) but rewarding for the good done: '...by the kindness of God the fault is suppressed and

not taken into account.<sup>130</sup> It is in God's mercy that he overlooks such errors. Indeed '...we need not wonder that God in his mercy should pardon such defects, which would otherwise defile almost every virtuous deed...'.<sup>131</sup> This should lead to confidence in 'our desire to do rightly, since God so graciously pardons our infirmities', but also it gives us a sober warning 'to be on our guard lest, when we are desirous of doing well, some sin should creep in to obscure and thus contaminate our good work'.<sup>132</sup> We are to be confident, but never complacent.

### 19. Scientific 'problems'

The final area in which we see the tool of accommodation exercised by Calvin is in issues of scientific 'error'; that is when statements in the Bible do not correspond with the world as understood through scientific research. For instance in Genesis 1:6 where the writer talks of the 'waters above and below', which is of course incorrect according to 'science', Calvin states that what is being talked about here is the 'visible form of the world', i.e., it is language of appearance rather than a statement of scientific fact. In this case the reason for this is that Genesis 1 is not designed to be a science book but a school for everyone, learned or unlearned.<sup>133</sup> To him 'who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts,' Calvin writes, 'let him go elsewhere.'<sup>134</sup>

This is not to say that Calvin was opposed to the study of science or disregarded it in any way. Far from it. He applauds the study of science, if it will help us in our understanding of God and his Word. E. C. Lucas comments: '[a]lthough critical of pagan thinking and convinced that the fallenness of man includes his intellect, Calvin did not disavow the use of extra-biblical knowledge in exegesis even when it came from non-Christian sources.'<sup>135</sup> Calvin himself writes: '...if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics and dialectic, mathematics and other disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance.'<sup>136</sup> He can say this because he believes that wherever we find truth we should ascribe it to God, and thus we should not despise truth, wherever it might come from.<sup>137</sup>

We find a similar idea when Calvin looks at Genesis 1:16. Here is described the creation of the 'greater light and the lesser light', i.e., the sun and the moon. Scientifically speaking, the moon is not the 'next great light' to the sun in terms of size. One of the other planets would fit that category more accurately, if not another star.

However, once again, we find here the language, not of scientific discourse, but of appearance. Although scientifically the moon is not the next great light, to the naked eye it is. The reason why Moses writes in this way, says Calvin, is so that '...all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand'.<sup>138</sup> He adapts 'his discourse to common usage' otherwise 'the uneducated might have pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity'.<sup>139</sup>

At this point it must be noted that behind this accommodation is God himself: 'Lastly since the Spirit of God here opens a common school for all, it is not surprising that he should choose those subjects which would be intelligible to all.'<sup>140</sup> In this school 'they who perceive by the moon the splendour of night, are convicted by its use of perverse ingratitude unless they acknowledge the beneficence of God'.<sup>141</sup> Thus, although scientific facts are not communicated in this passage, it is not left devoid of use. Rather, by using language of appearance, all, whatever their learning, can be taught to give God his due for creation.

Once more, Calvin does not want us to conclude from this that scientific study should be 'reprobated', rather it is 'very useful to be known' as it 'unfolds the admirable wisdom of God'.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, without it Calvin would not be able to conclude that this was an example of accommodation. We can use it, as Donald Mackay points out, to make sure we have the 'correct viewing distance'.<sup>143</sup> By this Mackay means that rather than concluding that Scripture is wrong in the light of science when we find passages like Genesis 1:16, or that science is to be shunned as it 'disagrees' with Scripture, it may be that *our understanding* of Scripture is at fault. Science may help us to gain a correct viewing distance, thereby understanding Scripture for what it is trying to communicate rather than simply appealing to a surface reading. Science can help us eliminate 'improper ways of reading' Scripture.<sup>144</sup>

## 20. How do we move from what was *meant* to what it *means*? Bridging the Hermeneutical Gap

Traditionally, in Christian theology, the *locus* of revelation from God is to be found in the Bible, and thus it has been the theologian's natural response to turn to this book when faced with contemporary ethical issues. However, some are now calling into question the validity of this approach.<sup>145</sup> As we saw in the introduction, there are various arguments against the usefulness of Scripture in

ethical issues today. We observed that cultural relativism, in its extreme form, argues that because the Bible was written to particular groups in particular situations these texts cannot possibly have any bearing upon modern debate. Others claim that our own situation colours our understanding and interpretation of texts, so much so that we do not gain anything from the text other than that which we brought to it.

This investigation into the concept of accommodation in Calvin's thought addresses, in some measure, these issues and provides a positive answer to both. Clearly it is the case that the Bible was written to particular people, addressing their particular needs in a way that *they* could understand; indeed, *how else could it have been written?* We have seen this repeatedly as God appears to tailor his revelation not only to their capacity for understanding but also to their particular vices of curiosity and the like.

Equally our investigation has shown that we come to texts with our own ideas and prejudices. This is the very reason Mackay calls for us to take a step back to gain the 'correct viewing distance'. We sometimes are too close to the picture, maybe assuming a surface reading of the text, and thus misunderstand it. This misunderstanding is probably due to our own context that lacks the rich meaning tied to various numbers, colours and images found in Hebraic thought. What the concept of divine accommodation provides for is the framework within which we can step back to consider the culturally relative nature of the text, to examine our own cultural assumptions and, positively, to see what God is communicating, or at least what the text *meant*.

Understanding what a text *meant* is the first key to establishing the *relevance* of a text for today. Having established meaning we must surely ask questions of its significance to the modern day in order to determine the relevance of a passage. Indeed this is what Kevin Vanhoozer argues in his essay, "The Bible – Its Relevance Today."<sup>146</sup> In this essay he gives a very helpful equation that further explains the relationship between the *meaning* and the *significance* of a biblical passage with regard to its relevance. He writes, 'biblical relevance = revelatory meaning + relative significance.'<sup>147</sup>

Vanhoozer goes on to explain that the 'meaning of a text is the sense that its author intended. To say "what it meant" is to describe past communicative

action....The meaning of a text does not change, for what is done is done'.<sup>148</sup> It may well be, of course, that our *understanding* of a text's meaning may be wrong, however the point here is that the *meaning* of a text remains the same however people may understand or misunderstand it.

Secondly, "significance" is...the relation a text's meaning has to some other context than that envisaged by the author. A text's significance, unlike its meaning, can change from context to context and is therefore relative'.<sup>149</sup> This relative significance is what actually makes the Bible so useful: '...the *same* meaning may be brought to bear on *different* situations in *different* ways.'<sup>150</sup> The two examined together will give us the biblical relevance of that passage for today.

The questions that we are left with are, how does one find out the biblical meaning? And how does one then evaluate its relative significance? We have seen how the tool of accommodation can help us understand what a text meant. It enables us to take a step back, to use the extra-biblical resources, such as scientific and historical research, to examine where divine accommodation is being made and what the true meaning is that underlies this accommodation. It helps us to examine our own prejudices and assumptions and enter into the world of the original reader.

All of the above helps us to examine what a text *meant*. The problem is that it seems that little more than informative knowledge is being imparted. Accommodation has enabled us to enter into the world of the ancient author and reader, it has enabled us to see the accommodations made to their capacity for understanding and thus translate what was said then to today. We have been able to understand texts that, to a modern mind, would have been taken as literal scientific texts when in fact they meant otherwise. But how can we go beyond this? At present we may be able to understand the ancient world more fully and how God accommodated himself to it, however we now seem stuck in that ancient world, understanding the accommodations made, but remaining at that level. How can Calvin claim that this accommodation is made to 'raise us up' to something beyond? A complementary and productive linguistical tool, known as 'speech-act theory', may help answer this problem and bridge the hermeneutical gap.



## 21. Speech-act theory

Speech-act theory was first proposed by J. L. Austin<sup>151</sup> and John Searle<sup>152</sup> in the 1960's, but has since been championed by Kevin Vanhoozer. However, it is with G. B. Caird that we will begin.<sup>153</sup> Caird gives five categories for the use of words: (a) to talk to people, things and ideas (informative); (b) to think (cognitive); (c) to do things and get things done (performative and causative); (d) to display and elicit attitudes and feelings (expressive and evocative); (e) to provide means of communal solidarity (cohesive).<sup>154</sup> *Speech-act theory* is essentially the idea that words are not simply *informative* but are *performative*; words can be used to do things—the speaker is ‘*doing* something rather than merely *saying* something.’<sup>155</sup>

There are various components of any communication. First, according to speech-act theory, there is the *illocutionary* act, what one *does* with a statement. This is followed by the *perlocutionary effect*, i.e., what response is then given by the person one is communicating with. Within the illocutionary act there is a further distinction. First, in any illocutionary act there is the *locutionary* act. This is what constitutes the propositional content of a statement (i.e., its meaning). Secondly the *illocutionary force* describes the *type* of speech-act that is being performed (e.g. a warning or promise).<sup>156</sup>

If this is the case then it could follow that in a number of illocutionary acts the propositional content (the locution) may well be the same, whereas the illocutionary force may differ. For instance, one may say, ‘shall we get married?’ (question); ‘we shall get married’ (prediction or promise); or ‘let us get married’ (a plea). All these statements have essentially the same propositional content (locution), but differ in their illocutionary force. It must be noted that the illocutionary act is not relative to the response of the listener, rather ‘[w]hat illocutionary act is performed is determined by the speaker; its meaning is therefore objective’.<sup>157</sup>

The *perlocutionary effect* is the response that the illocutionary act has upon the receiver. Thus the perlocutionary effect could be amusement, obedience, rebellion, repentance, etc. This may or may not have been effected by the illocutionary force, and thus may vary considerably from communication to communication. Most human communication relies upon rhetoric to affect the desired perlocutionary effect.

If this is the way that humans communicate, that is, not simply informing one another with words but actually *performing* actions with words, why cannot God communicate in this way as well? As Vanhoozer writes—

If God is a personal, albeit transcendent, agent, and if God can do some things, then there is no *prima facie* reason that God could not speak as well. Indeed in the prophets the distinction between the one true God and false gods is precisely the criterion of speech; false gods are dumb.<sup>158</sup>

If language necessarily involves speech-acts, and if there is no *prima facie* reason to dismiss the idea that God can communicate with words, then we appear to have in the speech-act theory a concept that enables us to see how words can actually *do* things as well as communicate information.

We have also noted how God accommodates himself to the various social conventions that give the locutionary acts their illocutionary force. One factor that will determine whether one understands or misunderstands the illocutionary act as a whole is the social conventions of the day. Indeed, we have already seen how a misunderstanding of the social attitudes to, for instance, standards of accuracy, can mean a misunderstanding of the speech-act.

Likewise a misunderstanding of the speech-genre can also have such an effect, as was seen in the issue between the Roman Catholic Church and Capernicus.<sup>159</sup> The notion of accommodation by God to the various practices and understandings of the people being written to, has helped us to note these various socially relative conventions. In doing so we have been able to take a step back from our own conventions to examine those of the biblical writers using tools such as science and historical research. Understanding the illocutionary act is one of the most important factors if the desired perlocutionary effect is to take place. If one misunderstands the illocutionary act then it is unlikely that the desired perlocutionary effect will take place.

The Bible does not contain just one type of illocutionary act; rather it comprises a whole range of speech-acts from promises and predictions to poetry, songs and questions. It is tautological to say that for the illocutionary acts to have any relevance for today there must also be perlocutionary effects

today. What is uttered, in various speech genres, must provoke response from the modern reader to be ‘relevant’.

Some speech-acts, as we have seen in the preceding study, have very limited *significance*, because the illocutionary act has a limited scope and thus the perlocutionary effect is likewise limited. We find this in some of the laws of the Old Testament where the illocutionary force (for instance a command) is aimed at specific people and designed to evoke a response (obedience) from them alone. Thus we come back to the question posed many times already: how can what seems to have a limited imperative authority have a perlocutionary effect today?

## 22. The Holy Spirit

Whereas human communication seems to rely upon rhetoric for the perlocutionary effect, the Bible relies on the Holy Spirit for its perlocutionary effect. This is an area that has not been hitherto discussed, but it has particular relevance here, and indeed forms a very important part of Calvin’s understanding of divine communication.

For Calvin, the preaching of the Word alone is ‘unfruitful’.<sup>160</sup> This is because our state as blind rebellious people intent on distorting the truth<sup>161</sup> means that, in the terms of speech-act theory, we cannot even understand the illocutionary act properly, let alone the perlocutionary effect desired by God. However, just as human discourse relies on rhetoric for the perlocutionary effect, God, through Scripture, uses his Spirit.<sup>162</sup>

Commenting on Ezekiel 2:2, Calvin writes that through the prophet hearing God’s voice, ‘God thus wished to animate his confidence: but he adds that he was not raised up by the voice, until *the Spirit placed him on his feet*.’<sup>163</sup> The Spirit is the one who takes the illocutionary act and enables the desired perlocutionary effect to take place. So Vanhoozer writes—

This is, I believe, how Calvin and the Reformers understood the Spirit’s illumination; the Spirit convicts us that the Bible contains God’s illocutions and enables us to respond to them as we ought. The Spirit is the effective presence of the Word, or, on my terms, the power of Scripture’s efficacious perlocution.<sup>164</sup>

This is vital for an understanding of how what was written can be relevant today, that is, how what was meant can become what it means. It is an assumption of Calvin's theology that the Spirit is continually working in making the Bible effective today. The Holy Spirit does not add anything new, says Calvin: 'the office of the Spirit promised to us is not to form new and unheard of revelations...but to seal our minds the very doctrine which the gospel recommends.'<sup>165</sup>

The Spirit's agency consists...in bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader and so achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect—whether belief, obedience, praise, or some other. The testimony of the Spirit is nothing less than the effective presence of the illocutionary force. Thanks to the Spirit's testimony, these biblical words *deliver*.<sup>166</sup>

If the concept of accommodation gives us a framework within which to understand the illocutionary act, with its various speech-genres that are tied to particular cultural conventions, the perlocutionary effect applied by the Holy Spirit helps us understand how all of that affects us today. The Holy Spirit is the one who takes what was *meant* to apply what it *means*.

### 23. Conclusion

Using Calvin's concept of divine accommodation as a focal point, this study has enabled us to see and understand a number of issues of how God, who in the biblical account is a personal being and wills to communicate with his creation, does so. There are obvious barriers to a straightforward communication between the divine and the mortal. Consequently, God has had to accommodate himself to his people, in language and action, in how he describes himself and how his actions are described. He accommodates himself to ideas and social conventions, but never in contradiction to his character, only to enhance communication with his people. Nor does he do this simply in order to *inform*, since the barrier of our rebellion and resulting blindness have made that futile. Rather, knowledge of God consists of knowing him *relationally*.

Through speech-act theory we have seen how language not only communicates information (informative), but also produces effects and brings about states of affairs (performative). In the case of the *divine* communication with man,

supremely through the incarnation, and through the testimony and application of the Holy Spirit, God has enabled man to know him in personal relationship. What was written in the past, in the Bible, not only *informs* us today, and *performs* in causing us to react emotionally as any book might, but it also enables and brings about true knowledge of God in relationship.

On this matter, Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully writes—

Does God speak in Scripture? Calvin refers both to the majesty of God's Word and to the divine stammering. To say that God's word is 'majestic' is to say that his illocutionary acts are mighty....On the other hand, God's mighty speech-acts are clothed in the form of human speech genres. In order to communicate with humanity, God has accommodated himself to creaturely media, to human language and literature, to human flesh and blood. God's Word, incarnate and inscripturate, is God in communicative action....The divine speech-acts, though humbly clothed, are nevertheless, powerful enough to liberate the captive, empower the weak, fill the empty and sustain the suffering.<sup>167</sup>

Calvin's concept of divine accommodation enables us to understand how God's mighty speech-acts work; it explains why such communication is necessary in the first instance, and then how God's communicative action is implemented. The role of the Holy Spirit in God's accommodating mighty speech-acts enables us to understand more fully how the perlocutionary effect is brought to bear upon us today. Scripture is more than an informative record of how God acted in the past; it is an action of God in the present.

The idea of divine accommodation, within the context of speech-act theory, enables us to appreciate more fully the *diversity* of literary genres in Scripture, the *culturally relative* nature of those various writings, and the *relevance* of such texts today. It helps us better attempt to gain the 'correct viewing distance' in our hermeneutical studies. It is our belief that Calvin's concept of divine accommodation, coupled with speech-act theory, provides a much needed hermeneutical corrective.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Basil Mitchell and Maurice Wiles, "Does Christianity need a Revelation? A Discussion," in *Theology*, (March, 1980).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. cf. Genesis 3:9; Exodus 20:1; John 1:18; Romans 1:19.
9. See below, especially pp. 9-15.
10. Basil Mitchell, "Does Christianity need a Revelation? A Discussion," p. 104.
11. *Ibid.*
12. James Barr, *Bible in the Modern World*, (London: SCM, 1973), p. 10.
13. Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Bible: Its Relevance For Today," in *God, Family and Sexuality*, ed. David W. Torrance (Carberry: Handsel Press, 1997), p. 9.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *The Post Modern Bible*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 14.
16. Vanhoozer, "The Bible: Its Relevance For Today," p. 10.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Vanhoozer addresses this in his book, *Is There Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998).
19. Vanhoozer, "The Bible: Its Relevance For Today," p.14.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Jon Balsarak, "*Deus humanitus saepe cum suis agere solet*: An Analysis of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin," (unpublished Ph.D: University of Edinburgh, 2002), p. 8-9.
22. T. F. Torrence, "The Knowledge of God and Speech about Him According to John Calvin," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), p. 77.
23. John Barton, *People of the Book* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 56.
24. Vanhoozer, "The Bible: Its Relevance For Today," p. 19.
25. Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," in *Interpretation* 31, (1977), pp. 19-38.
26. David F. Wright, quoted in Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 41.
27. This phrase is borrowed from H. Jackson Forstman, quoted in Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 4.
28. Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 52, emphasis mine.

29. "Subject matter of the present work," p. 7.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Inst.* I.xiii.7, p. 129.
34. *Inst.* II.ii.15, p. 273-5.
35. *Inst.* I.v.9, p. 62.
36. *Inst.* II.ii.16, p. 275.
37. cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I:I, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), "The Doctrine of the Word of God."
38. *Inst.* I.xiii.1, p. 121, emphasis mine.
39. Comm. Genesis 3:8, Vol. I, p. 161, emphasis mine.
40. *Inst.* I.xvii.13, p. 227.
41. Comm. Psalms 78:60, Vol. V, p. 270. cf. 86:8, Vol. V, p. 385.
42. *Inst.* I.xi.3, p. 102.
43. Comm. Ezekiel 1:28, Vol. XI, p. 106.
44. *Inst.* IV.i.5, p. 1018.
45. cf. *Inst.* I.xvii.13, p. 227.
46. *Inst.* I.i.1n1, p. 35.
47. Comm. Hebrews 4:16, Vol. XXII, p. 110.
48. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Glasgow: Collins, 1979), p. 323; although what Hick here expounds is in the context of an Irenaean Theodicy, and thus does not have the same concept of 'the fall' as we find in Calvin's theology. Despite this, 'epistemic distance' is still a useful term for the distance between man and God present even before 'the fall', whatever we may conceive the reasons to be for its presence in the first instance.
49. *Inst.* II.ii.24, p. 283.
50. *Inst.* II.v.13, p. 333.
51. *Inst.* III.ii.33, p. 580.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Inst.* III.xiv.5, p. 771-2.
54. *Inst.* I.iv.1, p. 47.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Inst.* I:xiii:1, p. 121.
57. Comm. John 3:12, Vol. XVII, p. 119.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*

60. Comm. Genesis 1:16, Vol. I, p. 86.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
62. Comm. Psalm 49:4, Vol. V, p. 239.
63. cf. Comm. Ezekiel 1:28, Vol. IX, pp. 105-106.
64. Comm. Isaiah 6:1, Vol. VII, p. 200.
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Inst.* I.v.9, p. 62.
69. *Inst.* I.v.2, p. 53.
70. *Inst.* II.ii.24, p. 283.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Inst.* I.iii.1, p. 40.
73. cf. Comm. John 6:41, Vol. XVII, p. 256.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Inst.* I.xiii.26, p. 155.
76. *Inst.* IV.xvii.2, p. 1362.
77. *Inst.* III.ii.1, p. 544.
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Inst.* IV.viii.5, p. 1152-3.
80. Comm. John 5:23, Vol. XVII, p. 202.
81. Comm. John 5:39, Vol. XVII, p. 218.
82. Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 30.
83. Comm. Genesis 35:7, Vol. I, p. 238.
84. *Inst.* I.xiv.1, p. 161.
85. Comm. Isaiah 6:1, Vol. VII, p. 200.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*
89. Comm. Ezekiel 1:28, Vol. XI, p. 106.
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.*
92. cf. Paul Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," in *God and Time*, ed., Gregory E. Ganssle, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), p. 45; also Helm, "God in Dialogue," in *Interpreting the Bible*, ed., A. N. S. Lane, (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), p. 235.
93. *Inst.* I.xvii.13, p. 227,
94. cf. Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," p. 46,



95. *Inst.* I.xvii.13, p. 227,
96. *Ibid.* cf. Helm “Divine Timeless Eternity,” p. 46; here Helm suggests that what appears to us as ‘change’ on the part of God is due to the progressive revelation of God’s purposes to the characters and the reader.
97. Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” p. 46.
98. Comm. Hosea 11:8-9, Vol. XIII, p. 402.
99. *Ibid.*
100. *Ibid.*
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*
103. *Ibid.*
104. *Ibid.*
105. cf. “Knowledge of God in Scripture and the Incarnation,” see sub-section in article.
106. Comm. John 6:41, Vol. XVII, p. 256.
107. John Calvin, “Short Treaty on the Holy Supper of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. xxii, Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, Trans., Rev. J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM, 1954), p. 145.
108. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995), p. 7.
109. Calvin, “Short Treaty on the Holy Supper,” p. 144.
110. For a fuller discussion of the functional nature of the Supper in Calvin’s thought, see Melvin Tinker, “Language, Symbols and Sacraments: Was Calvin’s View of the Lord’s Supper Right?” in *Churchman*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (1998), pp. 131-49.
111. Ford Lewis Battles, “God Has Accommodated Himself to Human Capacity,” *Interpretation* 31, (1977), pp. 19-38.
112. Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 255-7.
113. This is taken from the title of one of his essays on the subject, “God Attempering of his Law to the Barbarity of his Old Testament People.”
114. Comm. Genesis 35:7, Vol. I, p. 237.
115. Calvin, “Short Treaty on the Holy Supper,” p. 144, cf. above p. 12-13.
116. Comm. Ezekiel 1:28, Vol. XI, p. 106.
117. It may be argued that 2 Samuel 7:6 is a play on the word ‘house’ and is in fact referring to the ‘household’ i.e., the family. However this does not illegitimise this as an example of the absurdity of thinking that God lives in an earthly house built by men; if even his ‘family’ is not to be attributed to the pro-action of men, how less a brick residence.
118. Comm. Genesis 35:7, Vol. I, p. 238.

119. *Ibid.*
120. Comm. Psalm 132:8, Vol. VI, p. 150.
121. *Ibid.*
122. The following two examples are noted by Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 268.
123. Joshua 2:4, Vol. IV, pp. 45-8.
124. Exodus 1:20.
125. Comm. Joshua 2:4, Vol. IV, p. 47.
126. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
127. Comm. Exodus 1:18, Vol. II, p. 35.
128. *Ibid.*
129. Balsarak, *Deus humanitus*, p. 272.
130. Comm. Joshua 2:4, Vol. IV, p. 47.
131. Comm. Exodus 1:18, Vol. II, p. 35.
132. *Ibid.*
133. Comm. Genesis 1:16, Vol. I, pp. 86-8.
134. Comm. Genesis 1:6, Vol. I, p. 79.
135. E. C. Lucas, "Some scientific issues related to the understanding of Genesis 1-3," in *Themelios*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (1987), p. 47.
136. *Inst.* II.ii.16, p. 275.
137. *Inst.* II.ii.15, p. 273-5.
138. Comm. Genesis 1:16, Vol. I, p. 86.
139. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
140. *Ibid.*
141. *Ibid.*
142. *Ibid.*
143. Donald Mackay, *The Open Mind and Other Essays: A Scientist in God's World*, ed. Melvin Tinker, (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 152.
144. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
145. See above p. 4-7.
146. In *God, Family & Sexuality*, ed. David W. Torrence, (Carberry: Handsel Press, 1997).
147. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
148. *Ibid.*
149. *Ibid.*
150. *Ibid.*
151. J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
152. John Searle, *Speech-acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1969).

153. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Oxford: Duckworth, 1980), p. 7-36.
154. Melvin Tinker, "Last Supper/Lords Supper: More Than a Parable in Action?" in *Themelios*, Vol. 26, no. 2, (2001), p. 23.
155. J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 222
156. Tinker, "Last Supper/Lords Supper," p. 23.
157. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 154.
158. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 150.
159. cf. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 151.
160. Comm. John 1:43, Vol. XVII, p. 74.
161. cf. above p. 10-12.
162. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, pp. 155-6.
163. Comm. Ezekiel 2:2, Vol. XI, p. 108.
164. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 228.
165. *Inst.* I.ix.1, p. 94.
166. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 155.
167. *Ibid.*, p. 157.