The Fatherhood of God in Calvin’s Thought

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Introduction

Calvin on the fatherhood of God? What could one possibly find to say on such a subject? Indeed, while an immense amount of scholarship has been devoted to Calvin’s view of God’s sovereignty, next to nothing has been written on his view of God’s fatherhood. Most scholars, it seems, have tended to agree with the judgment of W.B. Selbie, who wrote,

With Calvin the position is different [from Luther]. His teaching on the sovereignty of God, the divine decrees, election and a limited atonement leaves no room for the idea of fatherhood save in the most restrictive and official sense.¹

Many critics of Calvin share the view of Erich Fromm, who says, “Calvin’s God, in spite of all attempts to preserve the idea of God’s justice and love, has all the features of a tyrant without any quality of love or even justice.”² While there are a few notable exceptions (e.g., Emile Doumergue and B.B. Warfield), even Calvinistic scholars seem to agree that Calvin’s doctrine of God is dominated by the concept of sovereignty or omnipotence.

I maintain, however, that this understanding of Calvin is so wide of the mark that it is not even a justifiable caricature. A caricature after all must at least be true to the predominant features of a man’s theological physiognomy.

As we consider Calvin’s view of God’s fatherhood in the light of his teaching on divine sovereignty, we would do well to be aware that we are dealing with a form or dimension of the paradox of grace and freedom. I’d like to show this graphically.

GRACE and FREEDOM

Ethics: Divine Sovereignty vs Human Responsibility
Soteriology: Irresistible Grace vs Personal Faith or Unbelief
Doctrine of God: Immutability vs Responsive Fatherhood

Firstly, we must strike the “and” between “Grace” and “Freedom.” The problem for human understanding is precisely our inability to join grace and freedom with a simple conjunction. They are incompatible, apparently contradictory—paradoxical. Therefore it is grace versus freedom, the great paradox. And this paradox has many faces. It intrudes into many areas of theological understanding. In the area of ethics, for example, it appears as divine sovereignty versus human responsibility. How can God be the sovereign source of all that is and man still be a moral being? In soteriology, it becomes irresistible grace versus personal faith or unbelief. If God’s grace is infallible in its effects, how can we speak of faith or unbelief as the ground of salvation or lostness? And when we take this same paradox into the doctrine of God, it may
be expressed in terms of God's immutability, changelessness, versus his responsive fatherhood. How can God be the changeless sovereign of the universe and still be a loving heavenly Father who hears and responds to the prayers of his children? In regard to Calvin's doctrine of God, most interpreters have apparently concluded that he has sold out fatherhood in favor of immutability. The paradox is gone. Calvin is seen as a determinist whose view of God leaves little or no room for personal, responsive fatherhood. In opposition to this view I shall try to defend the following thesis:

*The understanding of God as Father has a prominent place and a personal meaning in Calvin's thought, indeed it is constitutive to his outlook on Christian faith and life.*

I shall try to show this in three steps:

1. The Place of Fatherhood in Calvin's Doctrine of God.
3. The Determinative Role of Fatherhood in Calvin's Theology.

I. THE PLACE OF FATHERHOOD IN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

What is the place of Fatherhood in the doctrine of God expounded in the *Institutes*? A perusal of the table of contents reveals that the word "Father" appears only once in the chapter headings (Book II, Chapter V), and there it is used primarily to distinguish the First Person of the Trinity from the Second Person. A subject index of the *Institutes* shows that the primary treatment of God as Father comes in Book I, Chapter XIII (The Trinity), and in Book II, Chapter VI (Redemption in Christ). Such evidence, however, may mislead one into thinking that Fatherhood has a slight place in Calvin's doctrine of God. We must examine more closely the importance of the divine Fatherhood for Calvin, under the headings of Books I and II of the *Institutes*.

*The Knowledge of God the Creator*

The very first sentence of the *Institutes* indicates the nature of Calvin's inquiry—"Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." This interest in the interrelation of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, appears to have been a growing concern for Calvin. In the earlier editions of the *Institutes* there were separate chapters entitled "Of the Knowledge of God," and "Of the Knowledge of Man." In the 1559 edition, however, Calvin "shows more clearly the close interrelation of these by creating a separate chapter I, and emphasizing, both in title and content, 'how they are interrelated.'" Therefore, says I.J. Hesselink, "The practical, existential character of the *Institutes* continues to be a dominant motif." Calvin often makes explicit this preference for the personal and relational rather than the purely speculative knowledge of God. "... not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart." This is not to imply that Calvin here opts for knowledge of an extra-rational sort. Rather he calls for a more substantial kind of knowing. By relating true knowledge to the heart, he makes it more holistic and more personal and relational.
1. The Trinity—The Father as Person

It must be acknowledged that Calvin’s use of the word “Father” in reference to God is most frequent in his chapter on the Trinity, and in other places when he is speaking of the interrelations within the Godhead. The use of “Father” and “Son” are here necessary to enable him to distinguish the persons and express their interrelations.

However, the trinitarian use of “Father” does reveal Calvin’s understanding of the personhood of God and the sense in which he may be thought of as our Father. Obviously, Calvin’s understanding of personhood does not include the full scope of implications given it in much contemporary theology. Nevertheless, the personal titles given to the persons of the Trinity are relational titles for Calvin.

While the term “Father” is understood by Calvin to distinguish the first person of the Trinity from the others, he does not limit the providential qualities of fatherhood to one-third of the Trinity. Those same fatherly qualities are embodied in the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus Calvin sees fatherhood as residing in the essence of God, not in the subsistence of the first person of the Trinity alone. This unity of fatherly activity is evident even when Calvin summarizes the distinctions within the Trinity.

It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.

We may say then that Calvin uses the term “Father” with regard to God in two distinct ways. Here in the chapter on the Trinity, and on other occasions, he uses the term to distinguish and describe the relationships within the Trinity. Elsewhere, Calvin uses the concept of fatherhood to describe God’s relationship to his creation and especially to mankind. This latter usage includes the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is with the latter use that we are principally concerned here. It comes into focus, first of all, in Calvin’s doctrine of Providence.

2. Providence

Early in the first book of the Institutes, Calvin gives us his definition of piety in relation to divine providence.

I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service.

Calvin goes on to talk about fear of punishment before the divine Judge. This fear, however, does not drive the pious mind away from God for he sees judgment and reward in relation to God’s glory.

Besides, this mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone, but, because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores him as Lord.

Calvin shows repeatedly that he sees this all-pervasive providence in terms of God’s fatherly favor. “At present let it be enough to grasp how God, the Maker of
heaven and earth, governs the universe founded by him. Indeed, both his fatherly
goodness and his beneficially inclined will are repeatedly extolled."12 This fatherly
disposition of God is revealed, not only in Scripture, but in the Christian's total
experience in creation.

Calvin focuses in upon this fatherly love and care as the content of the true
knowledge of God. As Doumercue says, "It is the knowledge of his fatherly love that
is the true knowledge of God."13 Calvin puts it this way,

We ought in the very order of things diligently to contemplate God's
fatherly love toward mankind, in that he did not create Adam until he had
lavished upon the universe all manner of good things... in thus assuming
the responsibility of a foreseeing and diligent father of the family he shows
his wonderful goodness toward us.14

Trust in providence is of immediate, practical benefit to the believer. "Gratitude of
mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible
freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge."15
Thus Calvin turns his doctrine of Providence to a personal and practical end with a
strongly relational emphasis.

The Knowledge of God the Redeemer

Calvin begins the second book of the Institutes, not with Christology, but with
anthropology. In accord with his practical existential interest, he wishes to prepare for
his presentation of the Redeemer by confronting the reader with the true knowledge of
himself. When man sees clearly how far he has fallen from the Creator's purpose and
will, then he is ready to approach God with the humility and obedience which are his
due.

1. The Father and His Fallen Creation

How has the Fall affected the fatherly relation of God to his creation? Here arises
the importance of God's mercy. It is not too much to say that the very center of divine
fatherhood for Calvin is God's mercy toward his fallen creation. Calvin uses mercy
most often as a synonym for grace. God's mercy toward sinful mankind is his unmer-
ited goodness to his children.

For Scripture everywhere proclaims that the efficient cause of our obtaining
eternal life is the mercy of the Heavenly Father and his freely given
love toward us.16

This mercy is necessitated by the Fall, for "at their creation angels and men were
so constituted that God was their common Father."17 But that "natural" Sonship has
been forfeited by the advent of sin so that mankind now stands under God's wrath and
curse. Man is God's enemy rather than his obedient child. Yet it is God's fatherly
mercy toward his fallen creatures which lies behind the gift of his Son.18 His love
precedes our reconciliation in Christ—"because the Lord wills not to lose what is his
in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love."19 Thus God's fatherly
love in election precedes his grace in Christ—"Therefore, by his love God the Father
goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ."20
2. The Father in the Son

When considering the means by which God’s fatherhood is communicated to mankind, it is of some importance to choose one’s prepositions wisely. Calvin seems to teach that the divine fatherhood is communicated in the Son, and through the Holy Spirit. The significance of this distinction shall become clear as we proceed.

Throughout the Institutes Calvin makes it clear that it is his desire to be thoroughly Christocentric. It is perhaps not too much to say that the very intention of his theology was “an affirmation of the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ.” In Book II, Chapters VI through XVII, especially, Calvin is emphatically Christocentric, showing from Scripture and argument that redemption always has been and always must be sought only in Christ.

Here I am gathering a few passages of many because I merely want to remind my readers that the hope of all the godly has ever reposed in Christ alone. Unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved. In Book III, also, especially in the first fifteen chapters, we find some glowingly Christ-centered passages.

Yet more: we experience such participation in him that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity; while we are weak, while we are unarmied and exposed to Satan, yet ours is that power which has been given to him in heaven and on earth [Matt. 28:18], by which to crush Satan for us and shatter the gates of hell; while we still bear about with us the body of death, he is yet our life . . . we have all things in him.

Consistently, Calvin interprets revelation and redemption in Christ in terms of the fatherhood of God. God is our Father only in Jesus Christ. Christ is the object of faith as the Father is the object of its trust.

For God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ’s splendor had not beamed upon us. For this purpose the Father laid up with his only-begotten Son all that he had to reveal himself in Christ so that Christ, by communicating his Father’s benefits, might express the true image of his glory.

The very heart of the gospel is the annunciation of God’s fatherhood in Christ.

For the gospel preaching, too, declares nothing else than that sinners are justified apart from their own merit by God’s fatherly kindness; and the whole of it is summed up in Christ.

3. The Father through the Holy Spirit

As Christ is he in whom God becomes Father to us; so the Spirit is he through whom our adoption in Christ is realized. “To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”

Calvin does not, however, separate the Spirit from the Father. Following the orthodox formula of the Western text of the Nicene Creed, Calvin affirms that the Spirit “ex patre filoque procedit.”

God the Father gives us the Holy Spirit for his Son’s sake, and yet has bestowed the whole fulness of the Spirit upon the Son to be minister and
steward of his liberality. For this reason, the Spirit is sometimes called the "Spirit of the Father," sometimes the "Spirit of the Son." 28

Basing his understanding on passages from Pauline letters, Calvin emphasizes that the Spirit is essential to the experience of God's fatherly love. In his discussion of the titles given the Holy Spirit in Scripture, Calvin draws attention first of all to the title—"spirit of adoption." He explains that this means "he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become a Father to us." 29

Thus Calvin, taking his cue from Romans 8:14-16, affirms that only through the Holy Spirit do we become God's sons. "Paul teaches that God is called 'Father' by us at the bidding of the Spirit, who alone can 'witness to our spirit that we are children of God' (Romans 6:16)." 30

Again, in a summary statement, Calvin makes unmistakably clear that the faith which the Spirit effects in the believer is basically childlike trust in the divine Father.

Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation. 31

Such is the place of fatherhood in Calvin's doctrine of God as set forth in the Institutes. It has indeed a far larger and more central place than one would be led to expect from most of the interpretations of Calvin and Calvinism through four centuries. Now we must go on to consider Calvin's understanding of the meaning of God's fatherhood.

II. THE MEANING OF DIVINE FATHERHOOD FOR CALVIN

What does God's fatherhood mean to Calvin? What are the facets of his fatherhood, and how completely does Calvin work out the implications in his theology? Is fatherhood only a metaphor, an accommodation to human understanding? Calvin can on occasion tilt strongly against those who take the metaphors of Scripture too seriously.

The Anthropomorphites also, who imagine a corporeal God from the fact that Scripture often ascribes to him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet, are easily refuted. For who even of slight intelligence, does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness. 32

Nowhere, however, does Calvin give any indication that he includes the notion of fatherhood in these anthropomorphic accommodations. On the contrary, he consistently indicates that the divine fatherhood is the sum and substance of true knowledge of God; and, as we shall see, he carries out the various qualities of fatherhood in his explication of the divine-human relationship.

Contrary to the common picture of the man, Calvin gives a prominent and basic place in his theology to the divine fatherhood. A. M. Hunter goes so far as to say, "No
one has ever spoken or written with more warmth of genuine feeling about the Fatherhood of God and all that it implies of love and care and compassion." Whether this is an overstatement or not, I have found in Calvin a rather full development of at least four dimensions of the divine fatherhood: the Father’s begetting (generation); the Father’s authority (discipline); the Father’s care (nurture); and the Father’s relationship to his children (responsiveness). While each of these can, I believe, be clearly shown from Calvin’s works, for the sake of brevity, I shall focus only upon the fourth, since it is most central to our concerns.

**The Father’s Relationship to His Children (Responsiveness)**

A critical area for Calvin, or for any theistic interpretation of human life, is that of understanding the divine-human impingement as a relationship involving reciprocal responsiveness. If the metaphor of father-child is to stand, then not only must the child respond to the Father, but the Father must also respond to the child. Calvin’s understanding of relationship and responsiveness was, of course, different from that of contemporary thought. Following Luther as closely as he did on the bondage of man’s will, Calvin would certainly have been opposed to the measure of autonomy given to the human will by many prominent contemporary theologians. While the motivation for such contemporary affirmations of human freedom may be concern for human responsibility and the related question of explaining the origin of evil, the result is the opening up of the possibility of greater reciprocity in the divine-human relationship. This avenue Calvin has clearly rejected. While he also affirms human responsibility for sin, he refuses to grant man the autonomy which such responsibility would seem to require. His reason is that he will not in any way diminish the glory of God as expressed in his sovereign control of all things. Yet to affirm that God is our Father and we are his children, as Calvin so consistently does, must imply a relationship. A relationship, in turn, implies response on both sides—response to the other which is reciprocal and contingent. How does Calvin understand God’s fatherhood in this regard? In what sense and to what degree can the Father be said to respond to his children?

1. The “Repentance of God”

A significant issue for examining Calvin’s concept of divine responsiveness is the biblical idea of the repentance of God. In the *Institutes*, Calvin deals with this issue directly in I. XVII, 12-14. He takes the firm and consistent stance that God does not really repent. Repentance cannot be ascribed to God any more than ignorance, error, or powerlessness. The use of the expression in Scripture must, therefore, be seen as an anthropopathism, an accommodation to finite human understanding. Such speaking about God represents him, not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us—“neither God’s plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered: but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men’s eyes.” Calvin does, on occasion acknowledge that some change or conditionality is indicated by the divine repentance. Yet
even such change must not be understood as a response finding its source in human actions.

Strictly speaking no repentance can belong to God; and it ought not to be ascribed to his secret and hidden counsel. God then is in himself ever the same, and consistent with himself; but he is said to repent, when a regard is had to the comprehension of men.\(^{38}\)

Calvin stands firmly on the principle of divine immutability.

We see then that Calvin cannot tolerate the implication of change in God indicated by such words as sorrow, regret, or repentance. Such a notion of changeability is utterly incompatible with the divine blessedness and immutability. At times Calvin’s defense of God’s changelessness makes his immutability sound like immobility. And, as Karl Barth has pointed out, “God as pure immobility is a heathen concept of God—and leaves men without hope.”\(^{39}\) L. J. Kuyper in his article on “The Suffering and the Repentance of God,” expresses an attitude quite different from Calvin’s on the matter of the divine changeability.

The changeability of God manifests God in vital relationship with his people. Israel was not in the hands of an iron fate or a predetermined order. Rather the opposite was true, for Jahweh took into account all aspects of Israel’s life, whether it was waywardness, oppression by enemies, or penitence. Consequently, Israel knew that her manner of life had direct bearing on God’s rule of Israel.\(^{19}\)

Doubtless Calvin would have found it extremely difficult to concur with this latter-day Calvinist’s understanding of the Father’s relationship to his children. However, Calvin cannot with justice be accused of presenting a picture of an impassive God. His emphasis on the mercy, discipline, and tender care of the Father surely communicates a warm, compassionate, and responsive deity. Yet, it must be acknowledged that Calvin gets caught frequently at the point of strict, logical application of the principle of absolute sovereignty. While he struggles to maintain a sense of the divine responsiveness, that responsiveness is so radically qualified by the principle of immutability, that he comes out sounding like impassibility. This stance requires that Calvin apply the hermeneutical principle of anthropomorphism to the Scriptural evidences of God’s repentance, sorrow, or regret.

2. Human Contingency in Divine Action

This leads us to consider Calvin’s treatment of such human responses to God as faith, works, and prayer as conditions for divine response in relationship.

Calvin makes it very clear in the *Institutes* that his view of God can allow no human contingencies as efficient causes in the Father-child relationship. Even the exhortations and promises of Scripture do not deny this principle. The most he will grant is that they are instruments through which God effects his will. They serve the purpose of leaving the impious without excuse and of encouraging the pious to godly living.\(^{11}\) Calvin recognizes the problem of artificiality which this raises—“Why are they plied with exhortations, when they can hasten no more than the Spirit impels them?” His answer is, “O man, who are you to impose law upon God? If he wills to prepare us through exhortation to receive this very grace, by which we are made ready to obey the exhortation, what in this dispensation have you to carp and scoff at?”\(^{42}\)
Calvin's view of human contingency in divine action is seen most clearly in his understanding of faith. In fact, Calvin's treatment of faith sets before us the core of his understanding of the Father-child relationship. On the one hand, he consistently refuses to accept faith as a genuine contingency which determines the Father's response. All initiative and all effectual action in the relationship are found ultimately in God. On the other hand, Calvin gives a large place to faith as man's response to the divine mercy. He speaks of it as the ground of justification and the generating source of repentance and love. The logical consequence of Calvin's view of divine sovereignty should be a radical qualification of the relationship between the Father and his children, since that relationship does not seem to be understood by him as fully reciprocal. Yet Calvin affirms the vitality of that relationship throughout and attests to its personal and mutual character.

In summary then, what does the fatherhood of God mean to Calvin? Throughout his biblical and theological writings, Calvin tilts with equal vehemence against Deism and Pantheism. He strives to maintain the dynamic theism of the biblical perspective. Divine transcendence and immanence are both strongly presented. When involved in explicating his doctrine of God, Calvin frequently shows an inclination to give priority to the divine transcendence. His Christocentricity, however, persistently pulls him back to a balanced view. For Calvin, the confidence the believer may have in his perseverance and ultimate salvation can only be so because salvation is not contingent on human initiative. Such confidence can only reside in the sovereignty of the Father's grace.

These benefits: Gratitude, confidence, and peace, are not possessed by the believer in isolation, but are experienced only in the family of God. This is why piety, which Calvin understands as "reverence joined with love of God," is both the prerequisite and the product of true knowledge of God. The believer is not called to a feeling but to a family.

However, when it comes to the fatherhood of God, all is of grace. This constitutes a substantial limitation on the concept of divine fatherhood, particularly at the point of the Father-child relationship. Faith, works, prayer—all human responses in the relationship—are seen to be ultimately the work of God's Spirit. This is, however, a limitation whose genesis lies in the paradoxical nature of the scriptural revelation. Calvin strives to be faithful to both poles of the paradox.

III. THE DETERMINATIVE ROLE OF FATHERHOOD IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY

Finally, we must ask, What is the overall role of the divine fatherhood in Calvin's theology?

One half of the paradox, divine immutability, results systematically in the doctrine of irresistible grace. Calvin does not hesitate to draw out and affirm this systematic implication. But this is well known to even the casual student of Calvin. In the light of these systematic conclusions, it might seem that there would be little place in Calvin's teaching for a warm, personal, and reciprocal understanding of divine father-
hood. Indeed, all too few of Calvin’s interpreters have been able to see beyond the cold system of his thought. However, as I have tried to show, the view of God as Father has a fundamental place and a rich meaning in Calvin’s understanding. We shall seek now to show the determinative role which the divine fatherhood has in Calvin’s theology because of three structural themes we find in his teaching:

a. True theology is concerned with only such knowledge of God as ministers to piety;
b. Calvin’s pastoral concern that the believer turn from the hidden God to Jesus Christ as the mirror of the Father’s heart; and
c. The restrictive use of God’s “Word” as that which presents his fatherly benevolence.

Calvin refused to be “concerned with any ‘doctrine’ which would not promote the ends of ‘piety.’” Piety was, for him, an essential prerequisite for the knowledge of God. “Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety.” Early in the Institutes, he repudiates the search for the divine essence or attributes. Rather, he says, we should seek to know God’s nature. Calvin describes the “pious mind” as one that “is persuaded that he [God] is good and merciful...reposes in him with perfect trust, and...acknowledges him as Lord and Father.” Repeatedly through the Institutes and other writings, Calvin cautions against seeking an objective or speculative knowledge of God. Rather we need a knowledge of God’s relationship to us which takes root in the heart. “There is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation.”

It seems clear then that Calvin consciously and consistently embraced a warm, personal piety which emphasized the existential and relational understanding of the knowledge of God. While a theology has to have rational cogency and systematic structure, especially as it responds to the attacks of enemies, the aim of all true theology must be the establishment of the relationship of trust and confidence between God and man. In this understanding of true theology, Calvin’s grasp of the divine fatherhood has a determinative place. It is the paternal quality of mercy which excites the pious mind to trust. It is the childlike response of obedience which Calvin seeks to promote in the hearts of believers.

A second theme in Calvin’s thought which demonstrates the determinative place of divine fatherhood, is his admonition that the believer turn from the hidden God to Jesus Christ as the mirror [speculum] of the Father’s heart.

Thus, so that we may be confident of remission of sins, so that our consciences may rest in full confidence of eternal life, so that we may boldly call God our Father, under no circumstances must we begin by asking what God decreed concerning us before the world began. Rather we must begin by seeking what through his paternal love he has revealed to us in Christ and what Christ himself daily proclaims to us through the gospel. We must seek nothing more profound than that we become the sons of God.

When dealing with the deep mysteries of the divine will in the decrees and the apparent impersonality of that all-determining will, Calvin frequently appeals to the
hiddenness of God and the purpose of his will. T. H. L. Parker says, "the concept of Deus absconditus is as native to Calvin’s theology as it is to Luther’s." The word "secret" [arcanum] is the characteristic qualifier which Calvin attaches to the divine counsel. He uses it most frequently with reference to the mystery of the decrees of election and reprobation. For Calvin as for Luther, "the profoundest depths of hiddenness are located in the problem of double predestination, in which the will of God appears divided against itself and the individual is threatened with the possibility of rejection or loss."52

But this is precisely where we see the importance of divine fatherhood in the inner meaning of Calvin’s theology. In the face of that awesome and threatening hiddenness, he exhorts the believer to see the benevolence of the Father’s face mirrored in the person of the Redeemer. For Calvin, adoption into the family of God is synonymous with salvation. That adoption is only in and through Christ, the true Son. "God would be through the hand of Christ the deliverer of the church; and that his freely given covenant, whereby God has adopted his elect. would stand fast."54 The believer comes to know of his salvation only in Christ. "... unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved... apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God does not stand."55 Calvin sees Christ as the means by which the incomprehensibility of the Infinite is overcome. "God is comprehended in Christ alone."56 This does not distort or destroy the true knowledge of God, for only in and through Christ might believers "be persuaded that he was their Father."57

Calvin concludes his exposition of the "'Our Father'" of the Lord’s Prayer by saying, "To sum up: under the name ‘Father’ is set before us that God who appeared to us in his own image that we should call upon him with assured faith."58

It is of particular importance for our consideration to note that Calvin relates the idea of Christ as the mirror of election directly to the fatherhood of God.

Christ, then is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election... He, I say, was our witness that the Heavenly Father will count as his sons all those who have received him in faith.59

A third indication that God’s fatherhood holds a determinative place in Calvin’s thinking is found in his restrictive use of God’s "'Word’" in relation to faith as that which presents his fatherly benevolence. Calvin’s understanding of the "'Word of God’" becomes explicit already in the first book of the Institutes. In the sixth chapter he makes it clear that this term is rightly applied to the Scriptures. He sees Scripture as the recording of the oracles of God. In the thirteenth chapter he gives a more complete picture of his use of the term, including its relationship to Christ. "'Word,’ he says, "means the everlasting Wisdom residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth."60 Calvin identifies the Word or Wisdom with the eternal Son. "For here we see the Word understood as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father."61

In his long chapter on faith, Calvin distinguishes what it is in the Word to which faith responds. "But since man’s heart is not aroused to faith at every word of God, we must find out at this point what, strictly speaking, faith looks to in the Word."62 He
then points out some biblical examples of words from God which were words of “indignation and vengeance.” These did not inspire faith—rather they inspired fear and led those who heard them to shun God. Therefore, concludes Calvin, it is not merely the undifferentiated will of God expressed in his Word to which faith corresponds. Rather, he insists, it is the mercy of God, coupled with his truth, which is the ground of faith. Calvin does not mean that God’s Word is exclusively a word of benevolence. The word of judgment is just as really the Word of God. However, the close relationship between Christ and the Word, and between the Word and faith, leads him to identify within the Word that particular element or nucleus to which the believer responds with a living faith. That element is the father benevolence of God.

We see then that his understanding of God as Father is woven into the warp and woof of Calvin’s theological understanding. It is more than an occasional resort for relief or a contrapuntal theme. These three structural elements indicate that it is constitutive to his very outlook. Theology as the servant of piety, Christ as the mirror of the Father’s heart, and the Word as the message of fatherly benevolence, all point to the warm center of Calvin’s understanding of salvation: adoption into the family of God. “For, as Paul attests, faith is not true unless it asserts and brings to mind that sweetest name of Father—nay, unless it opens our mouth freely to cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

Conclusion

The theology of John Calvin is one in which a large and fundamental place is given to the fatherhood of God. The concept of fatherhood is basically related to God as Creator and as Redeemer. The roles usually associated with fatherhood—generation, discipline, nurture, and responsiveness—are strongly emphasized by Calvin. In the last of these, Calvin has some difficulty in giving personal reality to divine responsiveness, because he holds so firmly to the principle of immutability. He tries to maintain a real reciprocity and interpersonal relationship, but the logical consistency of his system often intrudes an insuperable distance. Yet, while responsiveness for Calvin may not mean change in God, he does see divine mercy (embodied even in providence and in election) as fatherly love and care. This is indicated by Calvin’s fondness for the idea of adoption as the root meaning of salvation.

Calvin’s view of grace is systematically connected with the premise of omnipotent will. This premise leads him logically to double predestination and to the immutability and autonomy of grace. It must be recognized, however, that the extent of Calvin’s systematic formulations was largely the result of the historical task which fell upon him and the historical setting in which he had to carry it out. This is particularly true of the polemical atmosphere of the time and the demand that Calvin defend his Institutes in a time of theological upheaval. (In view of the fact that the major attacks on Calvin’s theology came not at the point of divine fatherhood but in regard to the cluster of ideas surrounding irresistible grace, it is indeed remarkable that the divine fatherhood has such a large and consistent place in Calvin’s teaching!)

It is not a difficult task to show how Calvin’s doctrine of irresistible grace flows logically from the premise of absolute divine omnipotence. However, Calvin strives to
maintain a personal quality in divine omnipotence by relating it consistently to divine mercy and justice, and by aiming it at the ultimate goal of God’s glory. I have striven to demonstrate that the fatherhood of God also has a determinative role in Calvin’s theology. While this cannot be traced with the systematic logic of Calvin’s view of grace, certain structural themes in Calvin’s teaching make it evident how fundamental divine fatherhood was to him. All of these themes are so basic and interwoven in the fabric of Calvin’s theological concerns as to make the fatherhood of God not only essential but prominent.

The question of the compatibility of irresistible grace and divine fatherhood in Calvin’s thought is made more difficult by the fact that he nowhere treats specifically their apparent contradictoriness. He does deal with some paradoxical elements, but he does not develop an overall stance on the place of paradox in theological understanding. Rather, Calvin resorts to the concept of mystery, the mystery of God’s secret will. Here, he feels, lies the ultimate resolution to all apparent contradictions. This use of mystery allows Calvin to emphasize the personal, paternal care of the Father, alongside an equally strong emphasis on the immutability and autonomy of grace, and leave them juxtaposed without systematic resolution. In this respect, I believe, Calvin is following the example of Scripture.

FOOTNOTES

3 Such as that included in the L.C.C. Edition of the Institutes.
5 I. John Hesselink, “The Development and Purpose of Calvin’s Institutes,” Reformed Theological Review, XXIV, No. 3 (October 1965), 70.
7 E.g., John Oman in Grace and Personality; or Emil Brunner’s concept of “personal correspondence.”
11 Ibid.
13 Emile Doumerge, Jean Calvin, Les hommes et les choses de son temps (Lausanne: Georges Bridel et Cie Editeurs, 1960), IV, 90.
14 Inst. I, XIV, 2.
16 Inst. III, XIV, 17.
17 Inst. II, XIV, 5.
18 Inst. II, XVI, 1 & 2.
19 Inst. II, XVI, 3.
20 Ibid.
22 Inst. II, VI, 3.
23 Inst. II, VI, 4.
24 Inst. III, XV, 5.
26 Inst. II, X, 4.
27 Inst. III, I, 1.
28 Inst. III, I, 2.
29 Inst. III, I, 3.
31 Inst. III, II, 16.
32 Inst. III, I, 2.
34 Inst. II, VI, 4.
36 Inst. III, II, 1.
38 Inst. III, I, 1.
40 Inst. III, I, 3.
41 Inst. III, II, 16.
42 Inst. III, II, 5.
44 While Calvin also uses the image of the human will as a horse ridden by God or the devil, unlike Luther, Calvin allows that man obeys his rider, responding to the rider's direction. He goes on to describe how God, Satan and man may all be active in one event. Inst. II, IV, 1 & 2.
45 Wolfhart Pannenberg says there is a consensus on affirming free will among: F. Gogarten, R. Bultmann, E. Brunner, P. Althaus, and K. Barth, in "Christliche Glaube und menschliche Freiheit," Kerygma und Dogma, IV(1958), 270ff.
46 Ibid. p. 272.
50 In Scottish Journal of Theology, XXII, No. 3 (Sept. 1969), 269.
52 Inst. II, V, 5.
55 By the term "paradoxical" here, I mean that which is apparently self-contradictory. I find the apparently contradictory affirmations of divine sovereignty and human responsibility frequently juxtaposed in the scriptural witness.
59 E.g., Inst. I, IV, 9: I, X, 2; III, II, 6 and 36.
60 Inst. III, II, 15.
64 Inst. II, VI, 4.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Inst. III, XX, 40.
69 Inst. III, XXIV, 5.
70 Inst. I, VI, 2.
72 Ibid.
73 Inst. III, VII, 7, first sentence. While the capitalization of "word" is not found in the Latin, there is some justification for this interpretative use of the lower and upper case letters. Calvin does use "word of God" in a general sense applying to "all divinely uttered revelations" (Inst. I, XIII, 7), which may include a word of judgment as well as grace. Calvin also uses "Word," as we shall see, in a restrictive sense. This sense is more closely identified with Christ and may justifiably be capitalized.
74 Inst. III, XIII, 5.