Calvin on the Covenant*

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Among the many theological contributions that came to the church through the reformation of the sixteenth century was the doctrine of the covenant. Undeveloped in the preceding centuries, it made an early appearance in the Reformed Church in Zwingli and Bullinger who were driven to the subject by Anabaptists in and around Zürich. From them it passed to Calvin and other reformers, was further developed by the successors of the latter, and came to play a dominant role in much Reformed theology of the seventeenth and later centuries.

While the doctrine of the covenant does not receive treatment in Calvin's earliest writings, the second edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, published in 1539, devotes a chapter to the relation of the old and new covenants, the Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, published the same year, makes numerous references to the covenant in the exposition of the ninth chapter, the later commentaries and sermons discuss or refer to the covenant at appropriate times, and the last edition of the Institutes, published in 1559, has three chapters on the relation of the old and the new testaments of Scripture to each other and makes frequent mention of the covenant in the discussion of the sacraments. It is not a dominant theme in the reformer's writings, as are salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of God, the church, the enormity of sin, the reality and power of the Holy Spirit, and Scripture. It is nevertheless an important theme which, one suspects, Calvin had ever in mind so that it is not surprising to come across a reference to the covenant after one has read a long section of a commentary or some sermons in which there is not a single explicit reference to it. Elsewhere, as in the sermons on Deuteronomy, one meets the concept often, and there are numerous places where the discussion centers around the meaning of the covenant for the people of God today. In the third book of the Institutes, where the author writes about the Christian life, the covenant is only occasionally mentioned, but the relationship which it denotes is always at hand. Such an instance is the discussion on prayer with its emphasis on the divine promises and the fatherhood of God. Thus explicit allusion to the covenant is easy and natural so that the reader is unaware of the introduction of a new concept when that occurs.

It is incorrect to affirm without qualification then that Calvin was not a covenant theologian, or to set him over against later Reformed theologians on the Continent or in New England as though their theologies of the covenant were utterly different. For while it is true that in Calvin's writings one reads of no covenant of works, covenant

of redemption, or certain other refinements developed in a later age, the judgment of Everett Emerson against the opinions of Perry Miller and other recent writers will stand. Emerson writes that Calvin was not a “covenant theologian,” as that term is usually understood, “but [that] many of the implications of covenant theology that man can know beforehand the terms of salvation, that conversion is a process in which man’s faculties are gradually transformed all these are present in Calvin’s teaching.” Emerson had been comparing “some aspects of covenant theology with the teaching of Calvin in their approaches to the conversion process,” an important area of study for an understanding of Calvin on the covenant, and had questioned the propriety of comparing Calvin’s Institutes with the sermons of later covenantal theologians, claiming that a more fair comparison would have been that of Calvin’s sermons with the sermons of others. He concludes that there is a “near-identity of the approach of Calvin and that of the covenant theologians... Calvin was not so different from the covenant theologians as has been argued.”

It has been said that Calvin stressed the sovereignty and justice of God and man’s inability, while the later covenant theology laid emphasis upon responsibility and action. Thus Perry Miller has written that covenant theologians, after stating the conventional inability of man, “were at liberty to press upon their congregations an obligation to act, as though John Calvin had never lived.” As Emerson shows, however, “Calvin likewise pressed on his congregation the obligation to act, and in Calvin’s sermons statements of inability are in fact less common than in the sermons of the early New England divines.” A facile, comparative handling of the subject will not do therefore, and we propose to limit our inquiry here to a consideration of Calvin’s thinking of the covenant as to its (I) foundation, (II) realization in history, and (III) unity.

I

The Foundation of the Covenant

When Calvin uses the expression “covenant” he means by it the divine promise to Abraham and his seed, received in faith, that God will be a God and father to them, his people, and that they, enabled by his freely given grace, will live before him in loving obedience. The foundation of the covenant is God’s “eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). In his comments on that verse, coming after he had already discussed the teaching of predestination and our eternal election in Christ in the first chapter, Calvin exclaims, “How carefully does he guard against the objection that the purpose of God has been changed! A third time, he repeats that the decree was eternal and unchangeable, but must be carried into effect by Christ Jesus our Lord, because in him it was made.” To Calvin whatever happens in history is no happenstance but is the result of the antecedent decree of God. To ascribe to chance the fortunes of history is a “depraved opinion” which Calvin tries to lay to rest. He does so, however, not in the four chapters on predestination in the third book of the Institutes but in the three chapters on providence in the first book.

Calvin indeed has much to say on predestination, election, and the eternal decree, prodded as he was by certain of his contemporaries, and his primary reason for doing
so is to safeguard belief in the priority of grace in salvation and to enhance faith in the absolute lordship of God. That is why the treatment of predestination and election in the *Institutes* begins with the question why “the covenant of life” which is preached does not gain the same acceptance in the hearts of all people and subsequently makes numerous references to the covenant. Similarly, the discussion of election in the *Commentary on Romans* necessitates constant reference to the covenant, for there the agonizing question for the Apostle was the relation of his “brethren,” “kinsmen by race,” to God’s election and covenant. Theirs was “the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises…the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom. 9:3-5). Their unbelief, in the face of God’s manifest grace, is beyond Paul’s comprehension. Of two things he was sure, that “God’s purpose of election” would continue (Rom. 9:11; cf. 11:5,7) and that his covenant would remain with his ancient people, since the Deliverer would come from Zion to banish ungodliness from Jacob and take away their sins (Rom. 11:26f.). Calvin understood this to mean that God would respect the “old covenant” made with the patriarchs and that, in spite of unbelief, he would always keep for himself “a certain seed, that the redemption might be effectual in the elect and peculiar nation.”

To that nation, Calvin believed, God had added the gentiles so that together as one people they might serve him and enjoy his favor. Much is said about this in the *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Concerning the call of Abraham, for example, it is said that “the blessing was promised [Abraham] in Christ when he was coming into the land of Canaan. Therefore, in my judgment,” Calvin writes, “God pronounces that all nations should be blessed in his servant Abraham because Christ was included in his loins.” Earlier, in Noah’s blessing of Japheth whose posterity God would “enlarge,” Calvin had marveled that after thousands of years that progeny which had been “wanderers and fugitives were received into the same tabernacle” with the covenant people of God. He continues:

For God, by a new adoption, has formed a people out of those who were separated, and has confirmed a fraternal union between alienated parties. This is done by the sweet and gentle voice of God, which he has uttered in the gospel; and this prophecy is still daily receiving its fulfillment, since God invites the scattered sheep to join his flock, and collects, on every side, those who shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. It is truly no common support of our faith, that the calling of the Gentiles is not only decreed in the eternal counsel of God, but is openly declared by the mouth of the Patriarch; lest we should think it to have happened suddenly, or by chance, that the inheritance of eternal life was offered generally to all. But the form of the expression, “Japheth shall dwell in the tabernacle of Shem,” commends to us that mutual society which ought to exist, and to be cherished among the faithful. For whereas God had chosen to himself a church from the progeny of Shem, he afterwards chose the Gentiles together with them on this condition, they they should join themselves to that people, who were in possession of the covenant of life.

In Calvin’s treatment of the covenant as grounded in God’s eternal decree of election one notices a remarkable distinction within election. There is a “general elec-
tion of the people of Israel,” i.e., of the whole community, and a “second election” for “a part only,” the former also called “external calling” and the latter “the secret election of God.” Calvin felt driven to this distinction within the covenant in commenting on Romans 9:6-8:

Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants.

In wrestling with this problem, that not all within the covenant community receive its spiritual benefits, Calvin concluded that all who were born into the community “are rightly called heirs and successors of the covenant made with Abraham... sons of promise.” For God had sealed his covenant with Ishmael and Esau as well as with Isaac and Jacob. One may not call them aliens, therefore, for they had received the sign and seal of the covenant, and the promise of salvation was offered to them. Their ingratitude and refusal to receive the proffered grace does not invalidate the covenant, for God remains faithful, but it does demonstrate their exclusion from the “true election of God.” While this is true, those who are a part of the outer fellowship God “does not entirely exclude” but “joins” them to his family as “inferior” members until they cut themselves off. Thus circumcision, or baptism, is not useless until one repudiates his covenantal birthright, and that is done by the individual in his own decision.

Calvin saw this same principle at work in his day. God is not “tied” to the physical progeny of Abraham in his dispensation of grace, but in his “secret counsel” he effectually draws unto himself whomever he pleases. “By special privilege some certain persons are chosen out of the elect people of God in whom the common adoption may be effectual and firm.”

What Calvin had written concerning this two-fold election, of the whole community and of individuals within it, in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1539) and his Commentary on the Book of Genesis (1554), he wrote into the final edition of the Institutes (1559) as well. In the first chapter on predestination, after discussing the election of Abraham and Israel as examples of “a freely given covenant,” Calvin introduces “a second, more limited degree of election” which touches “individual persons to whom God not only offers salvation but so assigns it that the certainty of its effect is not in suspense or doubt.” So, while “Ishmael, Esau, and the like” are cut off from election “by their own defection and guilt” in violating the “condition [which] had been laid down that they should faithfully keep God’s covenant,” he causes his covenant to continue by effectually wooing others by “special grace.” Thus, Calvin writes,

the general election of a people is not always firm and effectual: to those with whom God makes a covenant, he does not at once give the spirit of regeneration that would enable them to persevere in the covenant to the very end. Rather, the outward change, without the working of inner grace, which might have availed to keep them, is intermediate between the
rejection of mankind and the election of a meager number of the godly. The whole people of Israel has been called “the inheritance of God” [Deut. 32:9; I Kings 8:51; Ps. 28:9; 33:12; etc.], yet many of them were foreigners. But because God has not pointlessly covenanted that he would become their Father and Redeemer, he sees to his freely given favor rather than to the many who treacherously desert him. Even through them his truth was not set aside, for where he preserved some remnant for himself, it appeared that his calling was “without repentance” [Rom. 11:29]. For the fact that God was continually gathering his church from Abraham’s children rather than from profane nations had its reason in his covenant, which, when violated by that multitude, he confined to a few that it might not utterly cease. In short, that adoption of Abraham’s seed in common was a visible image of the greater benefit that God bestowed on some out of the many. This is why Paul so carefully distinguishes the children of Abraham according to the flesh from the spiritual children who have been called after the example of Isaac [Gal. 4:28]. Not that it was a vain and unprofitable thing simply to be a child of Abraham; God’s unchangeable plan, by which he predestined for himself those whom he willed, was in fact intrinsically effectual unto salvation for these spiritual offspring alone. But I advise my readers not to take a prejudiced position on either side until, when the passages of Scripture have been adduced, it shall be clear what opinion ought to be held.23

I have quoted at length from Calvin on this point because of its importance to an understanding of his thinking on the covenant. The same is insisted elsewhere in the commentaries and sermons. The intention is to stress covenantal responsibility as well as privilege. To be numbered among the people of God is an inestimable favor indeed; its implication is the expectation of covenantal faith and obedience. Then, according to Calvin, God is honored, the world is offered a witness, and God’s people are blessed.

II
The Historical Realization of the Covenant

With the emphasis that one meets in Calvin on the sovereignty of God and the decree from eternity, it might be suspected that history and that which happens in it gets slight, or at least inadequate, attention. Is not history simply the “execution of the decree,” as later dogmaticians wrote? How then can it be decisive or that which happens in it be of lasting consequence?

To questions of that nature Calvin gave a sharp answer insisting that inasmuch as God has declared that our deeds here carry with them an eternal significance it must be so. Along with all the statements in the Institutes, the commentaries, and the tracts on predestination which speak about God’s absolute sovereignty in disposing of every human being as he pleases, there are as many statements about human responsibility and the importance of proper decisions here and now. And the sermons, we dare say, contain more of the latter than the former! An instance is the following from the heart of the discussion on predestination in the Institutes:

We teach that they act perversely who to seek out the source of their condemnation turn their gaze upon the hidden sanctuary of God’s plan, and wink at the corruption of nature from which it really springs. God, to
prevent them from charging it against himself, bears testimony to his crea-
tion. For even though by God's eternal providence man has been created
to undergo that calamity to which he is subject, it still takes its occasion
from man himself, not from God, since the only reason for his ruin is that
he has degenerated from God's pure creation into vicious and impure
perversity.24

Thus the reason for condemnation, even of those who have been favored with
covenant blessings, is in the despiser of those blessings in history. As sin occurs in
history, so does salvation occur within history, the scene of the stupendous activity of
God on behalf of mankind.

At the heart of salvation is the covenant of grace which God established with the
patriarchs and grounded and consummated in Jesus Christ. Whereas the covenant
began formally with Abraham and was reiterated to Isaac and Jacob, there were
“other promises which had been given to Adam, Noah, and others [which] referred
indiscriminately to all nations.”25 Adam and Eve were given the tree of life and Noah
and his posterity a bow in the clouds as signs that God would fulfill his promises.
“These Adam and Noah regarded as sacraments.” Because they had a certain mark
impressed upon them by the Word of God, they were constituted “proofs and seals of
his covenants.”26 Thus God had dealt with all mankind in the ancient fathers at the
beginning. For God had all mankind in mind from the first, and now that Christ has
come “the adoption has been extended to all nations, so that those who were not by
nature children of Abraham may be his spiritual seed.”27 Thus it is proper to denom­i­nate the covenant as “universal” inasmuch as it has been intended for and extended to
all nations.28

Calvin seems to enjoy reflecting on the divine intention to make Abraham and his
posterity a blessing to all the families of the earth so that there would be a spread of
the gospel everywhere, for he alludes to it often. The patriarchs, David, Job, Samuel,
and the prophets were all a part of God's program in history for the realization of his
purpose.

The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his
mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time,
the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation.
Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was
given to Adam (Gen. 3:15) it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was
added to, the light grew in fulness, breaking forth increasingly and shed­
ing its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed
—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth
(Mal. 4).29

With the coming of Christ the full meaning of the covenant was disclosed, for “all
the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20). There must be hundreds of
places in Calvin's writings where this is alluded to, sometimes by suggestion, fre­
quently by explicit statement. Let one example suffice:

The law was given to this end, that it might lead us by the hand to
another righteousness...it always has Christ for its mark...The law in
all its parts looks to Christ.30
The purpose of the entire Old Testament was to prepare the world for the coming of the Son of God. As a part of the Old Testament the law was given to cause the people to “despair of their own righteousness [and] flee into the haven of God’s goodness, and that is unto Christ himself. This was the end [i.e., the purpose or goal] of Moses’ ministry.” Calvin argues often in the commentaries of the Old Testament what he writes in one sentence in the Institutes: “The whole cultus of the law, taken literally and not as shadows and figures corresponding to the truth, will be ridiculous.” Apart from Christ they may be despised and ridiculed “as child’s play... if the forms of the law be separated from its end, one must condemn it as vanity.” Now that Christ has come and has brought with him salvation and the new age, the meaning of history has been made manifest and all creation awaits the time of his return.

III
The Unity of the Covenant

The unity of the covenant that God established with mankind in Abraham and confirmed in Christ is a major emphasis in Calvin’s teaching. We have already found it necessary to touch on this subject. Driven to it by persons who disparaged the continuing importance of the Old Testament after the appearance of Christ, Calvin saw it as crucial to an understanding of the gospel, and he states this repeatedly in the exegetical writings. It is also the major theme of the three chapters in the Institutes that treat the relation of the Old and New Testaments to each other. In the first of these, Calvin defines the gospel as follows:

I take the gospel to be the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ... The word ‘gospel,’ taken in the broad sense, includes those testimonies of his mercy and fatherly favor which God gave to the patriarchs of old. In a higher sense, however, the word refers, I say, to the proclamation of the grace manifested in Christ... The gospel did not so supplant the entire law as to bring forward a different way of salvation. Rather, it confirmed and satisfied whatever the law had promised, and gave substance to the shadows.

With that as introductory, Calvin moves into his main argument in the following chapter. The “point” that he wants to make and calls “very important” is “that all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him [fuisse ei foederatos] by this same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us.” Lest there be any misunderstanding, he goes on to affirm that the patriarchs “participated in the same inheritance and hoped for a common salvation with us by the grace of the same Mediator.” A paragraph later, he had progressed to where he can say: “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same.” Immediately thereafter he append a qualification: “Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.” The rest of the chapter is an attempt to substantiate the first proposition, that the covenant is one and the same; the next chapter discusses the varied administration (administratio tamen variat) of the two dispensations of the one covenant.
It is interesting to note, as H. H. Wolf remarks, that whereas the captions of chapters 10 and 11, on the "similarity" and "difference" of the Old and New Testaments, suggest two covenants, in Calvin's mind, there are not two covenants at all but, to use his own words, "one and the same." Rather than two covenants, there is "identity between the covenant of the fathers and the covenant established with us." In support of this proposition Calvin argues that in both the old dispensation and the new there was hope in immortality; that in both salvation was by grace alone; and that in both testaments believers "had and knew Christ as Mediator through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his promises." The difference in mode of administration consisted of the following: (1) in the Old Testament spiritual blessings were represented by temporal gifts; (2) in the Old Testament truth was conveyed by figures and ceremonies which typified Christ; (3) in the Old Testament truth is of the letter; the New is more spiritual (Jer. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 3:3-11); (4) there is bondage in the Old Testament, freedom in the new; (5) the Old Testament deals mainly with one nation; the New is concerned with all.

Calvin's position here, in which the unity of the covenant is emphasized, while, in our judgment, correct in fundamental stance, has been widely assailed. One of the most interesting criticisms is from Paul Wernle who wrote,

It is significant that it was the Reformed Christians precisely who had a specially keen interest in this Christianization of the Old Testament. The Reformed Christians were the practical party in the Reformation movement; the New Testament was not sufficient for their ecclesiastical-political institutions; they were compelled to go back to its Old Testament background and hence needed a unified authoritative Bible. The evangelical national state church and the Christian state as ideally pictured by the Reformed Christians both rest upon the basis of Old Testament theocracy...

In his moral zeal, Calvin utterly denies the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, closes his eyes to all the new values which Jesus brought into the world, and degrades him to the position of an interpreter of the ancient lawgiver Moses. How much more clearly the Baptists saw the truth in this respect...

The New Testament must be fitted in with the authority of the Old Testament; Christ is interpreted according to Moses.

In defending Calvin against charges of this nature Wilhelm Niesel holds that Calvin should not be understood as reading the Old Testament into the New and vice versa. While using each to explain the other, Calvin recognizes that "the Old Testament promises what the New Testament offers to us in Christ." Salvation in both dispensations is in Christ who is the head of the one body, the church; Christ is the foundation of the one covenant to which both testaments bear witness." Whether Niesel is successful in defending Calvin, or whether Calvin is justified in his argumentation, can be debated. Without entering into that, we observe that Calvin's fundamental position has become that of Reformed theology and that it has assumed a most important role in the Reformed understanding of the church and sacraments and the interpretation of the Old Testament.
In stressing the similarity of the Old and New Testaments, Calvin did not in any way wish to depreciate the superiority of the latter. The *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, not surprisingly, shows this as clearly as any of Calvin's writings, although one meets the same thought throughout the corpus of his works.

The father has put forth more fully the power of his Spirit under the Kingdom of Christ and has poured forth more abundantly his mercy on mankind [in him].

Under the old dispensation the promises were “obscure and intricate so that they shone only like the moon and the stars in comparison with the clear light of the gospel which shines brightly on us.” Thus Christ is the fulfillment of the Word of God that had gone on before; he gave it its true meaning and showed the glory of the promises of God in a way in which not even the prophets could imagine. Yet we are not to suppose that in Christ we have a wholly new phenomenon. Thus he remarks in commenting on Matt. 5:17:

God had, indeed, promised a new covenant at the coming of Christ; but had, at the same time, showed, that it would not be different from the first, but that, on the contrary, its design was, to give a perpetual sanction to the covenant, which he had made, from the beginning, with his own people. ‘I will write my law, (says he,) in their hearts, and I will remember their iniquities no more,” (Jer. xxxi. 33, 34). By these words he is so far from departing from the former covenant, that, on the contrary, he declares, that it will be confirmed and ratified, when it shall be succeeded by the new. This is also the meaning of Christ’s words, when he says, that he came to fulfill the law: for he actually fulfilled it, by quickening, with his Spirit, the dead letter, and then exhibited in reality, what had hitherto appeared only in figures.

...his doctrine is so far from being at variance with the law, that it agrees perfectly with the law and the prophets, and not only so, but brings the complete fulfilment of them.

According to Calvin, the law and the prophets would have their “complete fulfilment” in Christ because he was their foundation in the first place. We return here to the point made earlier, that Christ is the foundation of the covenant. This is stated nowhere more emphatically than in the commentaries on the prophets. Two examples from Isaiah will suffice:

The covenant which was made with Abraham and his posterity had its foundation in Christ; for the words of the covenant are these, “In thy seed shall all nations be blessed.” (Gen. xxii. 18.) And the covenant was ratified in no other manner than in the seed of Abraham, that is, in Christ, by whose coming, though it had been previously made, it was confirmed and actually sanctioned. Hence also Paul says, “that the promises of God are yea and amen in Christ,” (2 Cor. i.20,) and in another passage calls Christ “the minister of circumcision, to fulfill the promises which were given to the fathers.” (Rom. xv. 8.) Still more clearly does he declare that Christ is “the peace” of all, so that they who were formerly separated are united in him, and both they who were far off and they who were near are thus reconciled to God. (Eph. ii.17.) Hence also it is evident that Christ was promised, not only to the Jews, but to the whole world...the doctrine of
the gospel came forth out of Zion; because we thence conclude that it is not new, or lately sprung up, but that it is the eternal truth of God, of which a testimony had been given in all ages before it was brought to light.

We also infer that it was necessary that all the ancient ceremonies should be abolished, and that a new form of teaching should be introduced; though the substance of the doctrine continue to be the same; for the law formerly proceeded out of Mount Sinai, (Exod. xix.20), but now it proceeded out of Zion, and therefore it assumed a new form. Two things, therefore, must be observed; first, that the doctrine of God is the same, and always agrees with itself; that no one may charge God with changeableness, as if he were inconsistent; and though the law of the Lord be now the same that it ever was, yet it came out of Zion with a new garment; secondly, when ceremonies and shadows had been abolished, Christ was revealed, in whom the reality of them is perceived. 44

Thus the entire Old Testament was meaningful to Calvin in an unusual manner. Since Christ was the foundation of the covenant and both testaments found their meaning in him, that which was said by God to Israel was said to Calvin and us as well. The law was written to us, he is fond of saying in his explication of the Old Testament in commentaries and sermons. To cite an instance from the latter, a sermon from the Book of Deuteronomy, Calvin declares:

The law has not only been given as a rule to [help us] live well; but it is based on the covenant which God made with Abraham and with his posterity. By virtue of that covenant we are heirs of a heavenly kingdom, as St. Paul shows. When we seek salvation we have to go to that promise which was given our father Abraham; we must be his spiritual children if we would be servants of the church of God, members of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we see that this doctrine has not only served until the coming of the Son of God, but that it is useful to us, and will be until the end of the world. For it is a fortress built on this eternal covenant from which...our salvation proceeds, as from its true source. 45

Inasmuch as God's covenant is essentially one, with Christ its substance in both testaments, is the New Testament unnecessary? If Christ is revealed in the Old Testament and, in the days of his flesh, was its "faithful expounder," 46 was more needed? Calvin can write, "What is proposed to us in Christ except what God had promised in the law? and therefore Christ is called the end of the law, and elsewhere its spirit: for if the law is separated from Christ, it is like a dead letter: Christ alone gives it life. Since, therefore, God at this day exhibits to us nothing in his only begotten Son but what he had formerly promised in the law, it follows that his covenant is set up again, and so perpetually established." 47 What is the justification for such a statement? Are not Wernle and Calvin's other critics correct?

Not if Calvin is understood. Hesselink has written:

If Christ is the substance and the soul of the law, the eternal Mediator to whom the law and prophets witness, and apart from whom his ministry is incomprehensible, then Christ's "faithful interpretation" (as well as that of the rest of the New Testament) of the law is nothing other than a self-witness! That is, only through Christ do we understand who Christ is (as
witnessed to in "the Scriptures," i.e., the Old Testament). 48

He then quotes Calvin's pointed comment on Luke 24:27: "In order that Christ may be known to us through the gospel, it is necessary that Moses and the prophets should go before as guides to show us the way...From the law therefore we may properly learn Christ if we consider that the covenant which God made with the fathers was founded on the Mediator." Hesselink remarks:

If the Old Testament is not in some way a "Christian" book, then it can be dropped from the canon. If Christ was not present and active in God's dealings with Israel, then we indeed have an abstract God on the one hand and a shaky "religion of the New Testament" on the other. But if we follow Calvin here, then we will insist that "Christ did not first begin to be manifested in the gospel" (Commentary on John 5:39). 49

In this way Calvin seeks to solve the main hermeneutical problem of the Old and New Testaments. As he sees it, Christ is the key to the understanding of both testaments. In him the hermeneutical circle is complete: Christ cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament; the Old Testament cannot be understood, in its true sense, apart from him.

Christ cannot be properly known in any other way than from the Scriptures; and if this is so, it follows that we ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them. Whoever shall turn aside from this object [ab hoc scopo], though he may weary himself throughout his whole life and learning, will never attain the knowledge of the truth...By the Scriptures...is here meant the Old Testament; for it was not in the gospel that Christ first began to be manifested, but, having received testimony from the law and the prophets, he was openly exhibited in the gospel. 50

In the preceding paragraph the "object" of Scriptures was cited. This is an important point in Calvin's treatment and it requires some attention. According to him, Christ is the object, the aim, the goal of Scripture in its entirety and, as they find their respective places in relation to the whole, of its several parts. He is its "soul," its "spirit," its "end." As the unicus scopus totius scripturae, the single object of all Scripture, the genuinus sensus scripturae, the authentic meaning of Scripture, Christ is indeed the dei loquentis persona (Inst. I,vii,4), God himself addressing us in it.

Christ is the end of [the law] to which [the law] ought to be referred. It was turned away in another direction when the Jews shut Christ out from it. Hence, as in the law they wander into by-paths, so the law too becomes to them involved, like a labyrinth, until it is brought to refer to its end, that is, Christ. If, accordingly, the Jews seek Christ in the law, the truth of God will be distinctly seen by them, but as long as they think they are wise without Christ, they will wander in darkness and never arrive at a right understanding of the law. Now, what is said of the law applies to all Scripture—that where it is not taken as referring to Christ as its one aim, it is mistakenly twisted and perverted. 51

Having considered Calvin's teaching on the covenant with respect to its foundation in God's eternal purpose in Jesus Christ, its realization in history, and its unity, we have taken up what appear to be the three most important motifs of his thought in
this area. There are others with which a comprehensive study would have to deal. The fuller, richer revelation given in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; the law of the covenant with Calvin’s emphasis on duty and obedience, the reality of the Holy Spirit and the motivation that comes from him, the joy that comes in seeking to live as children of the covenant, and prayer; the inclusiveness of the covenant; Calvin’s use of both covenant and testament in the interpretation of Heb. 9:16; covenantal responsibility—these, and undoubtedly others, would surface. All are important and reflect major concerns in the teaching of the Reformer. Inasmuch as it is commonly believed that Calvin’s emphases are elsewhere, I close with a typical warning against covenantal irresponsibility. It is taken from the Magnificat of Mary:

Not all who are descended from Abraham according to the flesh are the true children of Abraham. Mary confines the accomplishment of the promise to the true worshippers of God, to them that fear him: as David also does: “The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them,” (Ps. ciii. 17, 18). While God promises that he will be merciful to the children of the saints through all generations, this gives no support to the vain confidence of hypocrites: for falsely and groundlessly do they boast of God as their Father, who are the spurious children of the saints, and have departed from their faith and godliness. This exception sets aside the falsehood and arrogance of those who, while they are destitute of faith, are puffed up with false pretences to the favour of God. A universal covenant of salvation had been made by God with the posterity of Abraham; but, as stones moistened by the rain do not become soft, so the promised righteousness and salvation are prevented from reaching unbelievers through their own hardness of heart. Meanwhile, to maintain the truth and firmness of his promise, God has preserved “a seed,” (Rom. ix.29).

FOOTNOTES
5. Institutes, II, ix, x, xi.
7. E.g., Institutes, III, xx, 45.
8. In contrast Anthony A. Hockema writes that “the doctrine of the covenant of grace occupies a very important place in his (Calvin’s) thinking.” Calvin’s Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace, The Reformed Review, 15/4 (May, 1962), p. 3.
10. Ibid., p. 141f.
11. Ibid., p. 142.
12. Ibid.
13. The word is usually foedus in Latin and alliance in French, often with a noun or pronoun added.
15. Institutes, III, xxi, 1.
17. Commentary on Genesis 12:3.
22. Institutes, III, xxi, 5.
26. Institutes, IV, xiv, 18.
29. Institutes, II, x, 20.
31. Commentary on Romans 10:5.
32. Institutes, II, v, 1.
33. In the “Argument” of the Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists (1555) Calvin says that the gospel writers “had no intention or design to abolish by their writings the law and the prophets; as some fanatics dream that the Old Testament is superfluous, now that the truth of heavenly wisdom has been revealed to us by Christ and his Apostles.” In the Institutes (1559) “that wonderful rascal Servetus and certain madmen of the Anabaptist sect” are cited for denigrating the importance of “the Israelites” (II, x, 1). Servetus is mentioned for the first time in the edition of 1559. Willem van den Bergh writes that, while Calvin had long been disturbed by radical opinion on this subject, “from 1553 on it appears to have been placed in the foreground in his dogmatics firmly and with emphasis.” Calvin over het Genade Verbond (The Hague: W. A. Boschoot, 1879), p. 71.
34. Institutes, II, ix, 2, 4.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Institutes, II, x, 2.
38. Wolf, Eie Einheit des Bundes, p. 19. Calvin sees the Davidic covenant (Ps. 89; 2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17; 2 Chron. 7:18) as a high moment in the historic realization of the one covenant of grace. The Davidic covenant derives its significance from the covenant of grace made with Abraham and has no significance apart from it. It finds its true meaning in David’s greater Son. Commentary on Psalm 89: 31., 35-36.
39. Institutes, II, x, 2.
41. Niesel, The Theology of Calvin, p. 105. Doumergue writes: “It is particularly inaccurate, one notices, to repeat that Calvin has confused the Old and the New Testament. And it would not be necessary to deepen these differences between the two covenants very much in order to dig an abyss between them. Calvin has not done that. For him the “differences” do not destroy “the unity.” The differences “refer to the diverse manner which God has used in administering his doctrine rather than the substance” of that doctrine. . . . St. Paul declared that when we read the law of God attentively we prudently look for the spirit which is contained in it which will serve to give us good instruction to lead us to faith, as we also see in experience. For whence have our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles drawn their teaching except from Moses? And when one shall have carefully sifted through the whole matter, he will find that the gospel is only a simple exposition of that which Moses declared formerly. It is true that there was the obscurity of shadows and figures of the law, that God did not give such grace to the ancient fathers as to us; but nevertheless, if the substance of the gospel is drawn from them, [it is true] that we have a common faith with those who have lived before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 8:10.

Commentary on Isaiah 42:6 and 2:3; cf. Commentary on Romans 4:1 where Abraham is eulogized as a "pattern" for the whole church; and on Romans 10:4: "The law was given to this end, that it might lead to another righteousness... it always has Christ for its mark... The law in all its parts looks to Christ."

Sermon on Deut. 1:1-3. CR56 (CO25), 611. The sermon on Deut. 5:2f., that "God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day," gives Calvin the occasion to emphasize the perpetuity of the covenant, and he makes the most of the opportunity, CR56 (CO26), pp. 242-246 particularly. Cf. Commentary on Jer. 31:31-34.1. John Hesselink has a splendid treatment of this subject in Calvin's Concept and Use of the Law, chap. VII. Unpublished dissertation, Basel, 1961.

Commentary on Matthew 5:21.

Commentary on Ezekiel 16:61.


Commentary on John 5:39.


Commentary on Luke 1:50. Yet the irresponsibility of his covenant partners does not "disannul" God's covenant faithfulness because the covenant is "founded upon the perfect immutability of his nature." Commentary on Psalms 89:34.