

CHAPTER 10

APOLOGY TO SCHOLARS

Warning: This section is full of technical jargon that will confuse (and bore) most people. If you don't regularly think about things like "ontology," or "the archetypal/ectypal theological distinction," or "univocal predication," feel free to close the book at this point.

I didn't want to bog this book down with twenty-five cent words, foreign language script, or technical discussions about philosophy and theology. However, I know this simple, life-changing message will die the death of hundreds of other popular-level books if it can't get past the gatekeepers. Who am I talking about? The scholars at our seminaries who determine which books pastors and aspiring pastors should read. A few bad reviews from the gatekeepers, and a book can be stamped "anathema." One of the most devastating critiques being, "The old boy is out of his depth." This being the case, I will conclude by defending my right to say what I have said before the "wise and intelligent."

10.2 LET'S GET TO IT

Theologians, please answer me this. Why is the most foundational description of God in the Bible, first found in Exodus 34:6,¹ been so tragically overlooked in the history of Christian theology? I call it *The Derakim*,² and it tells us that God is **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."** Perhaps someone will take issue with my statement that these words are all that important. To back me up, I call as witness some of the most influential biblical scholars and theologians of the last century, across the spectrum from the most progressive to the most conservative. They don't agree about much, but all seem to agree that *The Derakim* has Mount Everest-like importance in the Bible. From left³ to right, I have statements from the biggest guns, from Walter Brueggemann, to Brevard Childs, to J. I. Packer.⁴ Even outside Christian discussion there is agreement that the biblical significance of this description of God is unparalleled. Judaic theologian Abraham Heschel, for example, calls Exodus 34:6-7 "the words which are of fundamental importance for the understanding of all biblical words."⁵

The sixty-four thousand dollar question, or perhaps more aptly "the mystery of the ages," is this—If it is so important, why won't any Bible-believing theologian just tell us in plain language what it means? There are almost no articles on it, except a handful which (to my point) emphasize how overlooked this description of God is.⁶ To my knowledge, there has been only one book of note that attempts to explain what it actually tells us about God ... in the history of the world.⁷ The book came out in 2017 and was quite good. The problem

is that the author avoids higher-level scholarly issues that will inevitably undermine his argument. (There is no way the book will make it past the theological gatekeepers.) So back to the original question.

10.3 A 25-YEAR JOURNEY

My journey into *The Derakim* began about a quarter-century ago, after training for several years under one of our generation's great biblical scholars, Craig Blomberg. My debt to him is enormous, even if he might not agree with all my conclusions. He is an example of a conservative scholar with a high view of Scripture who is not afraid to challenge the status quo. After graduation, an existential crisis led me to take the tools I picked up in seminary and go on a personal quest after God. The year was 1998, and I began ransacking the Bible for anything I might have missed.

My search eventually led me to *The Derakim*—"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."⁸ When I found it my soul cried out, "Where have you been all my life?" This is clearly the central theological paradigm in the minds of the biblical authors. It is quoted and alluded to more than any other description of God (e.g., Exod 34:6; Num 14:17-18; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Mic 7:18-20; Nah 1:3; John 1:14-18; Jas 5:11; et al.). I wondered why I had never heard anything about this amazing description of God in Bible college or seminary,⁹ or from the pulpits of the Bible-believing churches I attended since childhood.

Desperately wanting to gain insight into *The Derakim*, I was sure I could get help from a miraculous new research tool, the internet database ATLA. (Remember, this was 1998.) I was utterly dumbfounded by what I discovered—almost nothing.¹⁰ How was it that during the writing a thesis on Christian baptism I could find all sorts of articles devoted to the theological implications of the Greek preposition εἰς, or archeological evidence linking Jewish purification rites to Christian baptism ... but I could find virtually nothing on the theological meaning of the most foundational description of God in the Bible?! What could possibly explain this oversight? Why are there no scholarly books on it? Why do Bible-believing systematic theologians continue to dodge it?

I decided to pursue this mystery at the PhD level. In 2001, I went to the mecca of Bible-believing scholarship—Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS).¹¹ Sitting at the feet of world-class theologians like Kevin Vanhoozer and John Feinberg (who had just finished his magnum opus on the doctrine of God¹²), I came to understand why Bible-believing theologians and scholars avoid Exodus 34:6. To be blunt, *The Derakim*, the central description of Yahweh in the Bible, “just doesn’t work.” A straightforward reading of it is at loggerheads (totally, utterly incompatible) with ideas about God that have dominated orthodox theological discussion over the centuries.¹³ This is touched on throughout the book (see, e.g., Chapters 2, 9, and Epilogue).

The time for my dissertation proposal at TEDS came (2004), and in my youthful zeal I attempted to crash the front gate. I planned to use a simple, straightforward (univocal¹⁴) reading of Exodus 34:6 as a battering ram to challenge the more traditional understanding of God. Needless to say, that project

was not approved.¹⁵ The committee, however, told me I was definitely on to something important, and encouraged me to do more prolegomena work. One of the main suggestions was that I become better acquainted with the writings of John Calvin. At first I was offended at this, because like all Bible-believing PhD students, I assumed that I already had Calvin pretty well figured out. How wrong I was. Like so many Christians, all I had was a paper-thin caricature.

10.4 CHALLENGING THE CARICATURE

I took an entire year to marinate my mind in Calvin, particularly in the 20,000 pages of his biblical commentaries.¹⁶ To make a long story short, I was surprised to find some of the most brilliant theological twists and turns I have ever encountered. These were ideas that even my Calvinistic professors seemed wholly unaware of (things that had nothing to do with predestination, sovereignty, or TULIP).¹⁷ I discovered, for instance, that Calvin wasn't constrained by the either/or dichotomy that was shaking Evangelical scholarship at the time—either Classical Theism, or Biblical Personalism.¹⁸ Calvin provided a logical superstructure that allowed for both. (You may want to reread that last line.) Accordingly, a Christian can vigorously hold to two seemingly contradictory visions of God without mingling them into a *tertium quid*, or having one cancel the other out. To be very specific, what we are talking about here is a rapprochement between seemingly irreconcilable theological perspectives. This will take some explaining.

Recent Calvin scholarship keeps drawing attention to one perplexing puzzle—the Reformer's habit of speaking about

God in two very distinct and separate ways. At times God is wholly other, and at other times He is very human-like. Calvin treats these two visions of God with utmost seriousness, and he unapologetically switches back and forth between them. (Those who assume that an easy appeal to anthropomorphism can resolve this issue have not examined the data.) Huijgen rightly says that making sense of this puzzle is “one of the most important desiderata for current Calvin research.”¹⁹

For those who are willing to dig, Calvin provides an ingenious rationale for this apparent contradiction. Here it is: Because infinite God is incomprehensible (meaning we can’t process the data),²⁰ He quite literally borrows a human nature when He engages human beings. In philosophical terms, what we are talking about here is a borrowed ontology. Infinite God, who cannot be comprehended by the finite human mind, takes on the ontology of a human being, so that He can be comprehended by the finite human mind. To be as clear as possible, God manifests in an actual human form that talks, thinks, feels, and responds like you and I do. This human form is not merely an analogy, or a figure of speech (anthropomorphism). It is not to be brushed aside in the pursuit of higher theological concerns (like speculations about God’s infinite nature or essence). Rather, it serves as the channel for divine/human interaction.

According to Calvin, when the Bible says that no one can see God (Exod 33:20; John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; 1 Tim 6:16), this is not primarily a statement about physical sight. It is a statement about the sort of being that infinite God is. Again, human beings are incapable of processing the data.²¹ Calvin says,

For it is not His will that we should search into His secret essence ... We see that whenever God is mentioned, the minds of men are perversely carried away to cold speculations and fix their attention on things which can profit them nothing; while, in the meantime, they neglect those manifestations of His perfections which meet our eyes, and which afford a vivid reflection of His character.²²

Because of this incomprehensibility factor, God appears to human beings with the actual, literal ontology of a human being. They can't see God in His infinite form, but they can see Him in this borrowed human form. They can't understand how He relates to them in His infinite form, nor can they have meaningful dialogue with Him (i.e, pray) to this infinite form, but they can dialogue with Him in His borrowed form. You get the point.

In Calvin's thinking, this borrowed ontology functions very much like a sacrament; it is a finite "thing" that allows human beings to engage an incomprehensible spiritual mystery.²³ God appears in this finite human form throughout all human history, beginning in the earliest pages of Genesis. This is how He allows Himself to be seen, understood, and known. God in this form is revealed finally and definitively in the Person of Jesus Christ, His ultimate self-disclosure to humanity (John 1:1-18; Col 2:9; Heb 1:1-3).

10.5 COLOSSAL IMPLICATIONS

The upshot of all this is that the human form God clothes Himself with is supposed to be the central focus in our everyday Christian life. This is the point at which the Reformer departs so radically from the vast majority of Christian theologians down through the ages. What this means is that we are not supposed to “figure out” the God of Classical Theism, and then “figure out” how to walk with Him, because this simply cannot be done.²⁴ If we are to have a relationship with God, we must come to know God in the form He clothes Himself in, the form ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ. (Note: Calvin’s writings on prayer demonstrate very specifically how this plays out in the real world.²⁵)

My findings in Calvin resulted in a complete shakedown of everything I had been taught in my theological training. In Bible college, graduate studies, and later post-graduate studies, I was encouraged to fearlessly probe into all the mysteries of infinite God, and then try to logically force all the pieces together into a coherent system. All evidence is that Calvin was violently opposed to this sort of intellectualizing of spiritual mysteries, and he avoids it like a disease.²⁶ According to him, human beings are simply too small and stupid to deal with God’s infinite nature and ways. (It is also worth noting that Calvin never says that calling such probing “ectypal” gives us a free pass.²⁷) Dozens of quotations along these lines can be found throughout his works.

God appeared under a visible form to His servant. Could Ezekiel on that account do as

scholastic theologians do—philosophize with subtlety concerning God’s essence, and know no end of moderation in their dispute? By no means, but He restrained Himself within fixed bounds. ... For this reason He says, upon the throne was the likeness as of the appearance of a man upon it.²⁸

Yes, Calvin ultimately holds to Classical Theism, God’s immutable will, double predestination, etc. However, what most pastors and scholars seem wholly unaware of is that he does not believe that these things all fit together like a logical jigsaw puzzle.²⁹ For Calvin, virtually all the hard doctrines he has become famous for (or in some circles, infamous), all lay on the incomprehensible side of things. He affirms them only because he believes they are stated in the Bible, not because they are logical or reasonable, or fit together. (If Calvin believed the Bible taught that in heaven there are square circles, or married bachelors, he would have believed that, too.³⁰) According to the Reformer, when we are confronted by the incomprehensible, we don't try to figure it out. We bow low and worship.³¹ What does Calvin say about those who do insist on figuring it all out and plunging in where angels fear to tread?

For then he casts himself into the depth of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he entangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness. For it is right for the stupidity of human understanding to be

thus punished with dreadful ruin when man tries by his own strength to rise to the height of divine wisdom.³²

If Calvin is right and we don't even have the capacity to figure infinite God out, this raises the question—How then can we have a meaningful relationship with Him? Answer: Embrace the fact that God clothes Himself with a human ontology and invites us to walk with Him and talk with Him in this way. As Calvin states, “For we know that God, when He descends from His majesty to us, is wont to transfer the properties of human nature to Himself.”³³

10.6 APPROACHING SCRIPTURE

Calvin's thinking here forced me to look again at Scripture and scrutinize the way all the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles related to God. What I found is that, from Genesis to Revelation, whenever God engages a human being His normal practice is to talk, think, feel, and even appear as a human being. God invites people to argue with Him like Abraham did, change His mind like Moses and the prophets did, and even wrestle with Him like Jacob did. God's servants seem abundantly clear on the fact that there is more to Him—"that which can't be seen"—but this is not for them to search out. They know that God is infinite, that He fills and transcends all, sees everything, and has unlimited power, but Abraham, Moses, David, and Paul also know they can't speak that language or comprehend those physics. The psalmist says, “**Such knowledge is too awesome for me. It is too lofty. I am not able to attain to it**” (Ps 139:6). This is why,

since the time when God walked with Adam in the cool of the day, He takes on the form of a human being.

The human form God takes on is not a deception or a ruse. As was already noted, it is like a sacrament—an earthly object that mediates an incomprehensible mystery. When the patriarch Jacob has a literal wrestling match with God in human form (grabbing actual arms and legs), Jacob is mysteriously engaging what would be otherwise invisible and incomprehensible to him. This also explains how Moses can argue with God like a trial lawyer over the fate of Israel, and how he can eventually change God's mind (Exod 32:14; Num 14:11-20). By vigorously engaging God as if He is really, actually human-like, Moses is mysteriously (sacramentally?) engaging the invisible and incomprehensible. The most compelling piece of data in support of this perspective is, of course, found in the New Testament when God quite literally becomes a man.

One of the twelve disciples once asked for something more than the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, i.e., God borrowing a human ontology. Philip says, "**Show us the Father and we will be satisfied**" (John 14:8). Jesus gives him a stinging rebuke. "**Have I been with you so long, and you still have not come to know Me, Philip? He who sees Me sees the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'**" (John 14:9). Jesus's words here make perfect sense if the incomprehensible God, who cannot be seen, only invites us to see Him and know Him in human form.³⁴

Tragically, theologians down through history have tended to downplay all human-like descriptions of God. Such talk is thought to be too low, too undignified. In our sem-

inaries and Bible colleges we are taught to ascend to the heavens and search out in minutest detail what cannot be seen—God’s infinite ontology. In doing this, we are trained to ignore the channel God Himself has given us for authentic, life-changing, divine-human interaction. Calvin was the one who helped me to see this flaw, this fatal flaw, in so much Christian discussion. Is it really fair to call this a “fatal flaw” in Christian thought? To answer this question, I will briefly step away from the scholarly and get practical—or, more aptly, pastoral.

10.7 DONNING MY PASTORAL HAT

From a pastoral perspective, attempting to see what cannot be seen—probing into God’s infinite being—is what leads so many people into an existential quagmire. Calvin calls this “the abyss” or “the labyrinth.” Believing we can understand God in His infinite form is what gives birth to all those classic sticky wickets. “Since God predestines, why evangelize?” “Since God is all-knowing, what is the purpose of prayer?” The most unsettling and destructive questions of this sort relate to theodicy and human tragedy. “Since God is in control, doesn’t that mean He ultimately scripted the abuse I experienced as a child?”³⁵ According to Calvin’s logic, all such questions are futile. Why? The questioner starts from the premise that they see what the Bible says can’t be seen and comprehend what the Bible says can’t be comprehended—infinite God. **“No one can look on Me and live”** (Exod 33:20).

What is the proper theological center point from which we are supposed to figure out our practical Christian

lives—prayer, evangelism, theodicy, etc? Answer: The fact that God invites us to know Him in the ontology that He borrows, the form ultimately revealed in the man Jesus Christ. This is the revelation of God that brings us the light and easy yoke that Jesus spoke of. We look to Christ to understand how to converse with God (pray). We look to Christ to understand God's heart for the lost (evangelism). We look to Christ to understand how we should deal with disease, injustice, and suffering (theodicy). As Calvin says, "God, who was formerly concealed in His secret glory, may now be said to have rendered Himself visible."³⁶ How such things relate to God's infinite ontology is an incomprehensible, dangerous abyss to be avoided.

As was already stated, this theological framework seems to accomplish the impossible. It resolves the either/or dichotomy that has dominated Evangelical theology in recent decades. God does not have to be either wholly other or human-like. He can be both. We don't have to deny the infinite. We can affirm this side of God with humility and caution ... and then back away slowly. (Were all of Calvin's views on infinite things correct? That's a discussion for another day.) But if we want to experience life-giving relationship, we walk and talk with God revealed in human form—ultimately, in the man Jesus Christ. This is how we mysteriously connect with the God who cannot be seen. As Calvin says,

If we were required to seek God without a Mediator, His distance would be far too great, but when a Mediator meets us, and offers Himself to us in our human nature, such is the nearness

between God and us, that our faith easily passes beyond the world and penetrates the very heavens.³⁷

10.8 "I SAW THE LORD"

How does all this relate to the subject of this book? *The Derakim* has been almost totally ignored in the history of theological discussion because it describes the human form God takes on so that we can see Him ... and not die. It is a theological paradigm that only works when describing someone with a human ontology. This is why Jesus Christ was so recognizable as God when He **“became flesh and dwelt among us.”** What this means is that this book is very unlike most theological tomes—it is not concerned about what God is or isn’t in His infinite mode of existence (the obsession of systematic theologians). It is concerned with God in the form He takes on for our benefit, so we can have relationship with Him.

In the final analysis, what the biblical record tells us is that Jesus Christ acts, reacts, reasons, feels, and responds exactly as Yahweh described Himself in the Old Testament. Very specifically, He is the God of *The Derakim*, **“compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness.”** What God may or may not be in His infinite state is, quite frankly, not the primary concern of Moses, David, or Paul.

Seeing and engaging God as He described Himself in *The Derakim* is so easy for little children. (It also clearly seems to be the way the greatest practical Christians down through

the ages engaged God.³⁸) It is also worth noting that this is what so many of us believed, more or less, before we went off for theological training. I believe it is what we all need to discover, or rediscover, if we want to walk in intimacy with God. So, in conclusion, a final note to the "wise and intelligent." Sorry. This book isn't for you. It's for the child-like.

At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father ... that You have kept these things hidden from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babies. Yes, Father, for this was well-pleasing in Your sight. Everything has been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."
(Matt 11:25-27)

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1. This study separated Exodus 34:6 from Exodus 34:7 because this follows biblical precedent (see, e.g., Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13). For further explanation, see Chapter 1, note 6.
 2. The reason this study refers to Exodus 34:6 as *The Derakim* is because the words were given in direct answer to Moses's prayer in Exodus 33:13, "Let me know Your ways (*derakim*)." For further explanation, see Chapter 1, note 5.

3. On the “left” there have been numerous studies of Exodus 34:6-7 among “higher” critics (an unfortunate designation, to be sure, because “higher” critics have such a “low” view of the Bible). These studies, of which no two agree, are devoted to speculative theories about the origins of this description of Yahweh. As a rule, they are not concerned with what it actually tells us about God; this is not the task of the “higher” critic. There have also been several synchronic studies, attempting to examine this description of God in the final form of the canon, but these also lack theological definiteness— i.e., what does it actually tell us about God? For a survey of this literature, see Chapter 1 in Nathan Lane, *The Compassionate, But Punishing God: A Canonical Analysis of Exodus 34:6-7* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2010).

4. Brueggemann states, "This is an astonishing disclosure of God, which tells Moses (and us) as much about the God of the Bible as any verse can." "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:947. Childs comments that its frequency in the biblical narrative "is eloquent testimony to the centrality of this understanding of God's person." Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 612. Among conservative Christians, few theologians are more respected than J. I. Packer. In his best-selling *Knowing God* (1973), he repeatedly mentions Exodus 34:6-7 as key to understanding the person of God, but does not attempt to interpret it. Another very influential conservative theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer, makes over 20 references to it in his *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). His primary goal, however, is to simply reconcile it with Classical Theism.
5. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 374.
6. As J. Carl Laney notes, "Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians ... (and) has fared slightly better in biblical theologians." J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), 36. Graham Cole is another conservative who has tried to draw attention to this description of God; see, e.g., "Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology," in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12.3 (2008): 24-36.

7. This helpful little book was written by Pastor John Mark Comer and is titled, *God has a Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017). Another book definitely merits mention here, and quite frankly strongly corroborates a lot of what will be said in the coming pages. The book, however, is not exclusively devoted to Exodus 34:6, but to the Hebrew word *hesed*. Michael Card, *Inexpressible: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017).
8. The designation *derakim* comes from Moses's cry just prior to the Exodus 34:6 revelation, "**Let me know Your ways (*derakim*)**" (Exod 33:13). This connection is seen elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Ps 103:7-8). Technical note: It is not entirely clear whether the word in Exodus 33:13 was originally the plural *derakim*, or singular *derek*. What tips the scales in favor of the plural is that in Psalm 103:7-8 the plural *derakim* is clearly connected to the words of Exodus 34:6. See also Psalm 25:4, where the psalmist seems to allude to Exodus 33:13 and also uses the plural. For advanced Hebrew students, see textual note in William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), p. 588.
9. My academic history is as follows: BA from Moody Bible Institute in Biblical Theology NT ('94); MA in Biblical Studies NT Greek from Denver Seminary ('97); ThM (which is actually an ABD PhD) in Systematic Theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (2010); and further PhD studies at Midwestern Theological Seminary (2020).

10. I say "almost," because there was one article on ATLA at the time that referred to this passage and, interestingly enough, Craig Blomberg's name was on it. Craig Blomberg and Ward Wilson, "The Image of God in Humanity: A Biblical-Psychological Perspective," *Themelios* 18.3 (1993): 8-15. (To be honest, it was not as helpful as I had hoped. The emphasis was more on psychology than theology and biblical studies.)
11. While working on my BA and MA, I learned that TEDS scholars write many of the books other Evangelical schools rely on. TEDS arguably has had more notable conservative scholars on its faculty in the last 100 years than any other Evangelical school; e.g., past and present theologians like Kevin Vanhoozer, Wayne Grudem, and Norm Geisler, biblical scholars like Gleason Archer, Doug Moo, and D. A. Carson, and historians like John W. Montgomery and John Woodbridge.
12. John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
13. What I am talking about here, of course, is Classical Theism. For a thorough discussion of this understanding of God that has controlled orthodox theology proper for almost two millennia, see John Feinberg's comprehensive overview. He notes the following attributes: (1) absoluteness, (2) absolute perfection, (3) pure actuality, (4) necessity, (5) immutability, (6) impassibility, (7) timelessness, (8) simplicity, (9) omniscience, (10) omnipotence, (11) creation *ex nihilo*, and (12) incorporeality. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, pp. 62-67.

14. The term “univocal” is often contrasted to “equivocal” and “analogical” predication in theological discussion. “Univocal” simply means that terms applied to God have the same basic meaning as when applied to human beings. “Equivocal” predication holds that such terms have no correspondence, while “analogical” predication holds that such terms apply to God and humans in an analogous way.

15. I eventually did come up with a passable dissertation proposal—a prolegomena piece related to Calvin’s appeal to divine accommodation. However (I will be polite here), the “official” story on that project was that I ran out of time. (For the less polite view, see Epilogue.) I went to a second institution ten years later (2020) to complete the project, and had a strange numinous experience. In the middle of a seminar, God powerfully communicated to me that I was supposed to just walk away. This is something I had never done before in my academic journey. So I got in my car, drove away, and that was the last PhD seminar I ever attended.

16. Calvin's *Institutes* and commentaries are supposed to be studied together. McKee says, "It is apparent that ... the *Institutes* and the commentaries were intended to complement each other ... in a symbiotic relationship." Elsie Ann McKee, "Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 168. Other significant scholars to emphasize this connection include John Dillenberger, J. K. S. Reid, T. H. L. Parker, and Edward Dowey. *Ibid.*, 169. Calvin himself makes the point in the preface to the French edition of *Institutes* (1560): "Car je pense avoir tellement compris la somme de la religion chrestienne en toutes ses parties, et l'avoir digérée en tel ordre, que celui qui aura bien compris la forme d'enseigner que j'ay suivye, pourra aisément juger et se résoudre de ce qu'il doit chercher en l'Escriture, et à quel but il faut rapporter le contenu d'ice."
17. Most of it would fall under the broader heading of "Calvin's appeal to divine accommodation"—a field which may aptly be compared to a vast unexplored wilderness. Many scholars still naively assume that the F. L. Battles article written in 1977 covers the subject adequately ("God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," in *Interpretation* 31:1). Recent studies on the subject rightly note that the Battles article barely scratches the surface. (For studies on this topic, see footnote 19).

18. This Evangelical debate produced books and articles too numerous to mention. The discussion culminated in the proceedings of The Evangelical Theological Society voting on the membership status of influential theologians Clark Pinnock and John Sanders in November 2003. See, Adelle Banks, “‘Open Theism’ Scholars Retained,” in *Christian Century* 120 (2003): 14-15, and R. Alan Streett, “Open Theism: Evangelicalism’s Latest Controversy,” in *CTR* 1, no. 2 (2004): 131-32.
19. Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 20. Other recent studies on Calvin have noticed this same strange feature. Jon Balsarak notes, “How ... can Calvin speak of a God who must endure—clearly against his will—the stubbornness and lust of his own people ... and also speak of a God who is so supremely powerful that his employing of angels requires explanation? Are not such images perilously close to being contradictory?” Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 54.
20. Calvin says again and again that God in His infinite state is completely inaccessible to the human mind. What he is talking about here is de facto the God of Classical Theism (immutable, impassible, simple, etc.). Although he believes this understanding of God is correct, he repeatedly indicates that its attributes are utterly incomprehensible to the human mind. They can be affirmed and adored, but not understood.

21. Calvin comments on John 1:18: "When He says that no man hath seen God, we must not understand Him to refer to the outward perception of the bodily eye; for He means generally, that ... God dwells in inaccessible light." Calvin Translation Society, *John* 1:54.
22. Calvin Translation Society, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:133.
23. To get what is being said here, one needs to understand Calvin's broader thinking on sacrament, which is massive and goes way beyond considerations of The Lord's Table and Baptism. According to the Reformer, virtually every promise of God must be attended by a sacrament. He states, "Since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, He condescends to lead us to Himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings. For if we were incorporeal ... He would give us these very things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, He imparts spiritual things under visible ones." *Institutes* 4.14.3. (Battles Translation [London: Westminster Press, 1960])
24. This is arguably the best explanation as to why Calvin has no section on the divine attributes in the *Institutes*, and why he assiduously avoids the speculative discussions so typical of systematic theologians. Richard Muller's (and others') contention that Calvin is silent on such because he approves the scholastic theologians before him is an argument from silence.

25. When it comes to our personal interaction with God, Calvin believed that He should be viewed as a compassionate, responsive Father who can be moved. This is seen very clearly in *Institutes* Book 3, Chapter 20 (on prayer), which has baffled theologians. John Sanders, for instance, says, “An interesting tension in Calvin’s thought . . . is that when he discusses the nature and value of prayer he speaks a very different language, as though God does, in fact, respond to our prayers, is receptive and enters into reciprocal relationships with his creatures.” John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 91.
26. Calvin gets downright perturbed at the sort of metaphysical speculation so common in traditional systematics. One humorous rebuke (that he uses more than once) is in response to the query, “What was God doing before He created the world?” To summarize, Calvin basically says (my paraphrase), “Creating hell for people who ask such questions.” (See, e.g., *Institutes* 1.14.1; and Calvin Translation Society, *Genesis* 1:61)

27. This is a point at which Calvin deviates radically from traditional Reformed dogmatics. There is absolutely no evidence in his writing that he ascribed to the archetypal/ectypal distinction in theology. This flies in the face of what influential Reformed thinkers (like Richard Muller and Paul Helm) claim. The fact is that Calvin never says anywhere that humans are free to probe the mysteries of infinite God ... as long as they acknowledge their findings are ectypal. Rather, what he says repeatedly is, *Don't mess with things you can't comprehend, or you will enter a labyrinth from which you may never escape*. Paul Helm attempts to impose the archetypal/ectypal perspective on Calvin in his book *Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), but elsewhere even Helm is honest enough to admit that he can't find any direct evidence of the archetypal/ectypal distinction in Calvin's corpus. See, Paul Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 21.
28. Calvin Translation Society, *Ezekiel* 1:102.
29. "(W)hile Calvin propounds his doctrine of providence with utter confidence, it does not function axiomatically in his system. While in his view providence is plainly revealed in Scripture, it is nevertheless 'secret,' 'mysterious,' 'a great abyss,' and so forth. These are not the marks of an axiom, which has its status because it is self-evident or obvious or perhaps because it is stipulated. Axioms function by having other propositions deduced from them. Does predestination/providence function like this in Calvin's thought? Clearly no." Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004), 118.

30. A friend of mine (who is a strict logician) protested my wording here because square circles and married bachelors are true paradoxes, while Calvin's sticky theological commitments are not. I maintain my case, because the Reformer clearly believes that spiritual realities often seem as contradictory as true paradoxes. This is precisely why he so often appeals to the idea of sacrament (or more specifically, "sign"). For a broader consideration of the idea of sign and sacrament in Calvin, see Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
31. Calvin states, "For it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in Himself, and to unfold from eternity itself the sublimest wisdom which He would have us revere but not understand, that through this also He should fill us with wonder." *Institutes* 3.21.1 (Battles translation)
32. This quotation relates particularly to predestination, but is one of the more famous quotes that falls under the broader idea in Calvin—infinite things should be left alone. *Institutes* 3.24.4 (Battles translation).
33. Calvin Translation Society, *Genesis* 2:198.
34. The apostle Paul puts it this way, "In Him (Jesus) all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form." (Col 2:9)

35. Recently, a theology professor at the Moody Bible Institute, with a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, walked away from the faith over his inability to make sense of this exact question. His ultimately unsuccessful attempt to resolve the issue can be seen in Paul Maxwell, *The Trauma of Doctrine: New Calvinism, Religious Abuse, and the Experience of God* (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).
36. Calvin Translation Society, *John* 1:54.
37. Calvin Translation Society, *Daniel* 2:45.
38. This is a subject covered in another book of mine, *There Must be More: Lost Keys to the Christian Life* (2022). (Go to www.lostkeysproject.com)