

The logic of Calvin's reform

If Luther's reform was triggered by a critique of indulgences, Calvin's was triggered by a critique of idolatry.

by [Michelle Sanchez](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue



John Calvin

This year's Reformation 500 celebration is hitched to an iconic event with mythical overtones: that singular moment in the fall of 1517 when someone hammered a list of "95 Theses Against Indulgences" to the door of the Wittenberg castle church in

Saxony. While the historical specificities of the event remain unclear—whether Martin Luther actually did the nailing himself or whether the theses were mailed to the archbishop of Mainz—the general scene has never failed to capture the imagination. A spirited monk in a relative outpost of the Holy Roman Empire, far from the Roman See, stood up to vast networks of power in order to theologially denounce what he saw as both financial and spiritual exploitation.

As an occasion to pause and consider what the Protestant reforms have meant to the world, this scene from 1517 makes as much sense as any. But it's important to remember its relative arbitrariness. Reform had been a common watchword among European intellectuals since at least the emergence of the Franciscans in the 13th century. A number of distinct reform movements arose before Luther and many more after him, and for each of them reform meant something different. As a result, the time of Reformation continues to yield heterogeneous legacies, all equally worth parsing as we think about what reform means today.

As the recent campaign slogans “Change we can believe in” and “Make America great again” attest, calls for reform function as necessary prerequisites for entry into public life in our own day. And now, as always, reform can mean drastically different things. It's crucial to read the fine print. What perceived corruptions make reform necessary? What strategies might work best to carry out needed reform? And—most importantly—to whom is reform accountable?

In the spirit of remembering the diversity of the 16th-century reforms, I'm going to take a closer look at Luther's younger French contemporary, Jean Calvin, and try to reconstruct some of what his project of reform looked like. Calvin is especially interesting because of all the 16th-century reformers his legacy has been most often tied to narratives of how the Western world came to look as it does today, with its ever-increasing interest in discipline, procedures, and—of course—the necessity of endless reform.

If Luther's entry into reform was triggered by a critique of indulgences, Calvin's was triggered by a critique of idolatry, particularly that which he perceived in the mass. Calvin was among those exiled after *L'affaire des placards*, or the Placards Affair, which was akin to French reformers' version of the 95 Theses. On October 17, 1534, five major French urban centers woke to find their cities papered with placards decrying the abuses of the “papal mass” on the grounds that it usurped Christ's role as the sole mediator between heaven and earth. It's unknown whether Calvin

himself was directly involved, but he was nevertheless implicated.

Calvin's attack on idolatry guided two dimensions of his thought. First, he reconceived institutional legitimacy as based on disciplined activities rather than on appeals to a historic lineage. Calvin defined the true church as marked by its performance of practices instituted by Christ: preaching and the observance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In this view, the church isn't legitimate because it traces its existence to the apostles; rather, the apostles were legitimate because they observed these practices in obedience to Christ. It's no stretch to see such an emphasis on disciplined activity as favorable to emerging democratic institutions, which place a similarly high premium on procedures rather than lineage.

The second dimension of his thought is his notorious insistence that God's hidden will decides what will happen—all for hidden reasons. On the one hand, this emphasis is simply one way of defending the view that salvation is by faith through grace, not works—a position not at all unique to Calvin. It was promoted by Luther and can be traced back to Augustine and to the apostle Paul. On the other hand, Calvin's articulation was distinct in the way he maximized the scope of this logic, applying it exhaustively to every worldly event. This more radical scope led German sociologist Max Weber (1893–1920) and others to argue that Calvinism was particularly aligned with the emergence of capitalism, with its emphasis on instrumental rationality and proceduralism.

Calvinists sought to avoid tying the word of God to any privileged location.

The logic of the alignment goes like this: if God's decisions are delinked from ordinary patterns of legibility—such as a sanctioned system of sacramental merit—then human beings can no longer base their actions on the legible logic of a spiritual economy. The assertion of salvation by faith effectively frees an individual to engage the world in new and diverse ways: to explore it and to pursue worldly ends for their own sake. Weber thought this meant in practice transferring one's attention from actions themselves to the fruits they produced, for if God's hidden will is legible anywhere in the world, it would be evident only in retrospect, after decisions have been made. If things pan out well for you in the wake of your daily endeavors, this might be a sign that God has in fact chosen you eternally.

Though Weber's narrative has been strongly contested, it still makes a lot of sense on its face. Once you accept that God's will decides identities and outcomes for hidden reasons, then the logic of proceduralism (and even something like manifest destiny) is all but neatly in place. Our job is to follow the proper discipline—the law, the process, or the law of supply and demand—and accept the outcome as one that is de facto justified by divine decision.

This narrative forgets, however, the extent to which Calvin's concern about idolatry shaped his theological articulation of both discipline and predestination. Like Augustine, Calvin's embrace of predestination came from an enduring worry that any suggestion of "merit" before God only tempts human pride to self-idolatry. If salvation is given only through the mysterious movement of God's grace, then there can be no grounds for human beings to boast about themselves.

In this way, Calvin's expansion of predestinarian logic can be appreciated as a tactic for resisting a sacramental system prone to the logic of idolatry. If idolatry lurks in any claim that an office or a practice can function as a stable signifier of divine favor, then to the extent that the church makes such a claim, it diverts people from the true source of their salvation.

Calvin's argument that the whole world is governed by God's hidden providence undermines the logic of idolatry. But it also risks the loss of legibility. If God refuses to identify *which* worldly persons or actions can be deemed essentially good, then no one can know or claim with any confidence whether any action or event is God-pleasing or not—and, per Weber's point, people will inevitably start conceiving of legibility in other ways.

Those inclined to stick up for Calvin might rightly interject that this account of Calvin overlooks the role of scripture. Scripture, for Calvin, fills the place of legible merit by telling believers how they ought to live. That's true enough. But it's also where reading the fine print is important. To merely replace a stable system of merit with scripture would risk treating scripture itself as a stable signifier of the divine will. It would, in other words, retain the structure of idolatry while only changing its privileged location.

Calvin does something more ingenious. He reframes the paradigm of divine goodness around the relationship that obtains *between* revealed words and created things. Put another way, Calvin reframes the Christian faith as a set of practices that

constantly draw attention to the wider world with the aid and guidance of the Word and Spirit. These practices are Calvin's project of reform.

For Calvin, the move to idolatry is short-circuited when a gap is preserved between words and the things they signify. The final (1559) edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is all about strategies for teaching Christians to mind this gap—both by maintaining it and by learning to constantly enjoy the spiritual relationships that obtain across it. If words and things must be kept apart to resist the creation of idols, words and things must nevertheless be properly related in order to come to perceive, know, and love God in the concrete way that God may be perceived, known, and loved.

For example, Calvin opens the 1559 *Institutes* with the distinctive claim that wisdom consists in the knowledge of God and ourselves and can be attained by the practice of discerning the many bonds through which these are related. He follows this with several other key claims: that God is to be known through God's works; that the works of God address humans in the two distinct modes of creation (world) and redemption (Word); that pursuit of this knowledge should not be speculative, but always grounded in its use and benefit to the life of the believer; and that in this enterprise scripture is not only to be read but also directed to its proper end.

Throughout the *Institutes*, the Word of God does not define the world (if things could be fully defined they would become idols). Rather, it resignifies the world by, for example, teaching the believer to read events with multiple meanings. The trained believer learns to see clouds as both water vapor and God's chariots; wind as both air currents and the Spirit of God; bread as both bodily nourishment and the body of Christ given for us; the world as both nature and the glory of God. The Word, then, is the thread that guides its reader through the labyrinth; it is a set of spectacles clarifying the relationship God assumes to the things God created.

Scripture is mediatory, and learning to use pedagogical mediation requires both discipline and a field of practice. To leave out the field of practice would be like wearing spectacles while remaining in a dark room. This is where the role of Calvin's radically expanded doctrine of providence begins to make more sense. For Calvin, the field of practice is not the church but the world. When Calvin claims that God's hidden will decides absolutely everything at all times, with no exceptions and no "mere permission," this isn't just an abstract assertion; it's a practical component of Christian teaching. This claim situates the end to which scripture is interpreted. In so

doing, it gives direction to the Christian life.

The sense in which providence stands as a doctrine to anchor interpretation is evident in many places, including these sentences where Calvin introduces the doctrine: “To make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.”

The argument is not introduced as an abstract account of what God, in theory, does. It is concerned instead with how “we see.” This is even more apparent in the sentence that follows: “For even though the minds of the impious too are compelled by merely looking upon earth and heaven to rise up to the Creator, yet faith has its own peculiar way of assigning the whole credit for Creation to God.” For the impious, things just are what they are. Earth is earth, heaven is heaven. Providence teaches the faithful reader to relate the two—to engage in a practice of resignification that links every inexhaustible detail of everything to God’s inexhaustible care.

In rendering the world this way, Calvin is not offering a privileged description of causality. Calvin understands that there are multiple causes at play in any event and that God’s providence doesn’t override them but affirms their created integrity. Providence, in fact, works primarily in relation to created intermediaries. This means that the radical language of total divine involvement has the effect of training a reader to see the world as if God is at work in every detail and to read scripture as signifying what such divine involvement intends for us, who are in God’s image.

Later, Calvin asserts that “the frame of the universe was to be the school of piety.” He also claims that with the aid of the Word—defined as the “faith of Christ” the Redeemer—it once more plays that role, supplying a frame in which Christians can learn to foster the right kinds of relationships between words and things.

Understanding this pedagogical and interpretive function of divine providence also illumines why Calvin’s reforms placed such an emphasis on disciplinary practices. After all, the very logic of self-discipline minds the gap between words and things. It treats the body itself as a forever-unsaturated field for materializing, bearing, and even recasting Christian teachings. By framing the universe as the proper school of piety, Calvin can redefine the reformed church as a community that exists to facilitate such world-directed exercises. The disciplines of preaching and of

sacramental observance rely on and relate to the real properties of ordinary things in the ordinary time of the present. Baptism and the Lord's Supper tie the ordinary properties of water, bread, and wine—of birth, cleansing, and nourishment—to specific bodies who observe them. The details of those bodies, in turn, enable the signs to mean what they do, sometimes in surprising ways. This is the work of the Spirit. But it is also the work of reform.

Christ teaches us to foster the right relation between words and things.

If Calvin's reformist logic is motivated by a critique of idolatry, then its tactics must constantly resist the temptation to tie the divine Word to some privileged location. Of course, such tactics always run the risk of transgressing their own convictions, establishing new forms of idolatry. There is a long and tragic history of Reformed Christians behaving as if the Roman Catholic Church were uniquely idolatrous. One lesson of Calvin's reforms, then, is that reformers must be vigilant against the temptation to essentialize an "other" merely to denounce it more easily.

The aspect of Calvin's reforming vision I find most worth remembering is this: that the reform of institutions is both made possible by and accountable to the ungraspable conditions of the world itself. The world, in all of its complexity, is willed by providence to bear and negotiate the signs of the divine Word. A practice of piety that looks beyond the figurative walls of interpretive habits, constantly asking after the fuller frame of the universe, supplies a potent posture for undermining the idolatrous ossification of words and things. By looking at what our habits have excluded or ignored, such a practice also supplies concrete resources for reimagining *how* a given institution ought to be changed.

Grasping this posture means appreciating how, for Calvin, the incarnate Word does not ignore or override material conditions but responds to them in their upsetting detail. This is nowhere more apparent than when he discusses suffering. Calvin argues that a Christian should never in Stoic fashion downplay the extent to which suffering causes real emotional, physical, and mental devastation. "If all weeping is condemned, what shall we judge concerning the Lord himself, from whose body tears of blood trickled down? If all fear is branded as unbelief, how shall we account for that dread with which, we read, he was heavily stricken? If all sadness displeases us, how will it please us that he confesses his soul 'sorrowful even to death'?"

It is out of this sorrow that a certain logic of reform emerges with clarity. According to Calvin, “the conclusion will always be: the Lord so willed, therefore let us follow his will. Indeed, amid the very pricks of pain, amid groaning and tears, this thought must intervene: to incline our heart to bear cheerfully those things which have so moved it.” Reform, at its heart, is a providentially shaped willingness to witness, feel, and care, and ultimately to follow God’s will as it aligns itself precisely with the forms of life that resist our norms of legibility and merit.

If Calvin’s reform teaches us anything in 2017, it might be this: rather than protecting our systems as (idolatrous) ends in themselves, we must remain attentive to those material circumstances that challenge them most. Reforms should make themselves accountable precisely to those bodies that our laws and procedures have most failed to see, affirm, and serve. For the Word that Christians follow does not identify itself with any one kind of system, but wills itself beyond; it weeps at what it encounters, and then cheerfully bears the flesh that has moved it to tears.

A version of this article appears in the August 30 print edition under the title “Dethroning the idols.”