A mirror for God and for us: 
Christology and exegesis in Calvin’s doctrine of election

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Abstract: Although John Calvin’s doctrine of election is often criticised, it remains seriously under-described in both content and form. By attending to one strand of its content (Christ and election), and one persistently unappreciated aspect of its form (exegesis), this article attempts a substantial construal of the doctrine in Calvin’s theology. It aims to show that for Calvin Christ is the subject of election in that he is its author, and Christ is the object of election in that he mediates both election itself and the salvation which flows from election. The focus on Calvin’s exegesis of election and Christology establishes contact points with some important theological concerns: Karl Barth’s reading of Calvin; election and the extra Calvinisticum; and ‘christocentrism’ in Calvin’s theology.

Introduction

Jaroslav Pelikan’s account of the lack of attention to the scriptural foundations of Martin Luther’s thought might just as easily be applied to that of John Calvin: ‘Historians have sought to assess the influence of everything from the theologian’s vanity to the theologian’s viscera upon the formulation of theological doctrines, meanwhile regarding as naïve and misinformed the suggestion that the Bible may be a source of these doctrines.’¹ In this article, I aim to examine one strand of the scriptural foundations of Calvin’s doctrine of election as a way of elevating the place given to text-reception in accounts of his theology. That the deep exegetical contours of election in Calvin have been largely neglected is doubly remarkable in light of the fame (notoriety?) Calvin


¹ J. Pelikan, Luther The Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer’s Exegetical Writings (Luther’s Works Companion Volume; St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 7.
enjoys for his thinking on election and predestination, and in light of the central place the Bible occupied in his life’s work.

One result of the paucity of material which examines the exegesis of election in Calvin is that many prevalent criticisms of Calvin do not offer a sufficiently comprehensive account to be convincing. Consider the following examples. In an influential two-part article which appeared in the first volume of Scottish Journal of Theology, J. K. S. Reid surveys Calvin’s understanding of Christ and election and argues that when we see what Calvin said on this topic ‘it is impossible to suppress surprise and even alarm.’ This is because, in Reid’s view, Calvin’s Christ is merely the executor of the decree of election and not also its subject – he merely carries out the Father’s bidding and has no role in the actual choosing itself. Remarkably, Reid’s work does not contain a single reference to any of Calvin’s commentaries. Reid is indebted to Barth’s expression of the theological problem in Calvin’s doctrine of election and has perpetuated this in his own incomplete presentation of Calvin’s position. This way of reading Calvin has not died out with older scholarship. Cornelis van der Kooi has recently commented on ‘Calvin’s purely individualistic exegesis’ and ‘his undervaluing of the category of covenant’ in his interpretation of texts such as Romans 9.18, 22. This assertion is made without any reference to Calvin’s Romans commentary where, arguably, the covenant appears as the most important hermeneutical concept in Calvin’s treatment of Romans 9-11 (he refers to it explicitly thirty-nine times).

My intention here is to provide a retrieval of Calvin’s views on Christ and election via a compressed presentation of his exegesis of this topic. After sketching the shape of Calvin’s position, I will then outline the relevance of this exegetical portrait for three wider theological issues: (i) the reception of Calvin in Barth’s doctrine of election;

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(ii) the role of the extra Calvinisticum; (iii) the issue of christocentrism in Calvin’s thought.\textsuperscript{4}

\section*{1. Christ and election in Calvin’s exegesis}
Calvin’s exegesis yields a view of Christ’s role in election which may be traced across a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, reaching back into eternity there is the pre-existent Son who is the author of election, the active subject who participates in the decree of election. However, this Christ is also the object of the decree, the Elect One, both as the pre-existent Mediator and as the Mediator in time. In his role as the pre-existent Mediator, Christ is the ‘Head’ of the elect, the one in whom certain humans are elect. In his role as Mediator in time, Christ continues to be the executor of the decree, the one who by his life, death and resurrection brings about the temporal salvation of those eternally decreed to be saved, and who puts himself forward as the object of faith. Calvin’s Christ is clothed in a range of metaphors which describe his relationship to the doctrine of election: Christ is a book, in whom the elect are written; Christ is a mirror, the place we look to see our own election; a guardian, protecting the election given to us by the Father; and a pledge, guaranteeing our election. The explanation of Calvin’s Christology and doctrine of election along this eternal-temporal spectrum corresponds to three contact points between Christology and predestination in Calvin: ‘the definition of election as “in Christ”, the assertion that predestination is known only in Christ, and the statement that Christ himself is the “author of election” together with God the Father.’\textsuperscript{5}

For Calvin, election is by Christ, in Christ, and known in Christ. In what follows I will outline Calvin’s exegetical presentation of these three areas.

\textsuperscript{4} This essay précis’s some of the Calvin material in my Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009), and presents a partial outline of issues treated in detail in the book. I am grateful to T&T Clark for permission to reproduce sections of this work here.

\textsuperscript{5} R. A. Muller, Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins (Durham, NC: Labryinth, 1986; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988; 2008), p. 35.
1.1. Jesus Christ as the subject of election

In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Calvin discusses three separate passages (6.70-71; 13.18; 15.16) which record Christ’s choosing of the twelve disciples. At the heart of these discussions is Calvin’s contention that although the same word for choosing is used in all three passages (eklegomai) it is not used in exactly the same way. In 6.70 Judas is one of the chosen; in 13.18 he is not (‘I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen’). For Calvin the sense in which Judas is both chosen and not chosen is a narrative detail which makes clear that two very different kinds of choosing are on display. He explains as he comments on 13.18:

When elsewhere [Christ] includes Judas in the number of the elect the expression is different, not contradictory. For there a temporal election is meant (notatur temporalis electio) by which God appoints us to any particular work – just like Saul who was elected king, but yet was reprobate. But here Christ is speaking of the eternal election (de aeterna electione) by which we are made God’s children, and by which God predestined us to life before the creation of the world.6

Calvin goes on to explain how the eternally reprobate can actually be adorned with God’s gifts which enable them to carry out their office (like Saul or Judas) but this is entirely different from the sanctification of the Spirit, something which God only grants to the eternally elect.

After making this distinction Calvin then explores the further implications of the verse. He argues that it contains a proof of Christ’s divinity because here Christ ‘makes

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himself the author of election’ (se electionis facit autorem). When Jesus says ‘I know whom I have chosen’, he is testifying ‘that those who were chosen before the creation of the world were chosen by himself (quum a se testator fuisse electos, qui ante mundi creationem electi sunt). Such a remarkable demonstration of his divine power should affect us more deeply than if Scripture had called him God a hundred times. So Calvin explicitly affirms that Christ plays an active role not just in the temporal choosing of the twelve to the apostolic office, but also according to his divine nature in the eternal choosing of individuals in a salvific sense. The Christ who chooses eternally is the Christ whose choosing brings some into the family of God and leaves others (like Judas) outside.

When the ‘choosing’ language surfaces again in John 15.16 (‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit’), Calvin equivocates between assigning a temporal or an eternal referent to it. He first admits that this passage does not ‘treat of the common election of believers (de communi piorum electione), by which they are adopted to be God’s children, but of that special election (de particulari) by which he appointed his disciples to the office of preaching the gospel.’ Nevertheless, Calvin also wants to suggest that there is a very clear parallel between this temporal election and eternal election; what unites them is that both are entirely free, taking no account whatsoever of human merit. The election to office sheds light on the election to salvation, and both are of a kind because both stem from Christ’s grace. Calvin argues that Christ is aiming to stir up the disciples to actively do their duty; nothing is more effective in doing this than the believer acknowledging that they owe everything to God and possess nothing of their own. For Calvin, both the beginning of salvation (eternal election), and all the parts which flow from it (in this case appointment to the office of preaching), issue from Christ’s free mercy. Calvin’s final comment on 15.16 is reminiscent of his exposition of 13.18: ‘That Christ says he is the author of both [forms of election] (Christus se utriusque facit autorem) is not surprising, since it is only

7 Comm. John, p. 62; CO 47, p. 311.
by him that God acts and he acts with the Father. So then, election and ordination belong equally to both.¹⁰

It is clear, then, that for Calvin Christ stands in such a relation to election that it may truly be said to be a se – and this carries both eternal and temporal reference. If Christ is the author of election, however, then for Calvin he is also election’s artisan. His exegetical writings reveal a complex and multi-faceted account of what it might mean to refer to Christ as the object of election. Here Calvin’s primary conceptual terrain is Christ’s work as Mediator, but the complexity arises from a particular understanding of the relation between time and eternity; or, better, between the decree of election and its execution both before time and in time. The one person of the Mediator mediates as the object of the decree in both spheres of execution. What does it mean to say that Christ mediates the decree both before time and in time? Stephen Edmondson expresses Calvin’s position like this: ‘[Christ] not only mediates the salvation that flows from our election; he mediates this election in the first place.’¹¹ If the first half of this sentence refers to Christ’s temporal mediation (election is known in Christ), then the second half refers to Christ’s pre-temporal mediation of election itself (election is in Christ).

1.2. Jesus Christ as the mediator of election itself

If we think in terms of Calvin’s spectrum for understanding Christ’s role in election – starting in eternity and moving into time – then the next point along the line is this: Christ is the object of election in an eternal sense by being the one in whom the elect from the human race are chosen. Here Calvin’s comments on John 15 and 17, as well as on Ephesians 1 (in both his commentary and his sermons), contain a focus on Christ as ‘the beloved Son’ and reveal Calvin’s exegetical conception of how Christ as Mediator is ‘head’ of the elect in such a way that he mediates election itself.

John 15.9 and 17.23-24 describe the love that the Father has for the Son. In his discussion of ‘as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you’ (15.9), Calvin is adamant

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¹⁰ Comm. John, p. 103; CO 47, p. 347.
that the Father’s love for the Son ‘must be referred to us, because Christ declares that the Father loves him as the Head of the church – a thing extremely necessary for us.’ Calvin uses two images to describe what this love of the Father means: Christ is ‘the pledge (pignus) of the divine love’, and ‘in him, as in a mirror (speculo), we may behold God’s fatherly love towards us all, since he is not loved separately, or for his own private advantage, but that he may unite us along with himself to the Father.’ Calvin’s description of this love is sharply focused on the economy – it is a love of the Son, but it is a love with benefits for us. In John 17.23, Jesus prays for the unity of believers ‘so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ In v.24 he prays about the glory which the Father gave to him ‘because you loved me before the foundation of the world.’ Calvin comments: ‘For the title of beloved belongs to Christ alone. But following on this, the heavenly Father has the same love for all the members as for the Head, so that he loves none but in Christ.’

It is the Father’s love of the Son that makes him the object of election, and it appears to function as what we may describe as a ‘representative’ election. Christ is appointed as the head of his people, and as such he is the representative of their election. As Edmondson explains:

For Calvin, it is not that we are chosen by God and, on the basis of that choice, engrafted into Christ’s body; we are too lowly, even in an unfallen state, to merit God’s favour. Rather, God looked upon our head, and predestined the chosen to life only as they were members of Christ. Christ is election itself, then, insofar as he is the head of the body.

These ideas are given further expression in Calvin’s comments on Ephesians 1:6. Here the biblical text locates election and adoption as taking place ‘in the beloved’, and

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15 Edmondson, Calvin’s Christology, p. 150.
Calvin describes Christ as the ‘material cause’ of salvation: ‘The material cause, both of eternal election, and of the love which is now revealed, is Christ, whom he names the Beloved, to tell us that by him the love of God is poured out to us. Thus he is the well-beloved to reconcile us.’

There are two things to note here.

First, we observe how Calvin makes an explicit distinction between the two ways in which Christ is the material cause: eternally and temporally. The former may be described as election itself; the latter as the salvation that flows from election. The Christ who both mediates God’s love in eternal election, and who reveals that love to us in time, this Christ is the beloved Son. Second, for Calvin the title ‘the beloved Son’, at least in election contexts, appears to work not at the level of describing immanent trinitarian relations, but rather the economic relations of the Father, the Son, and the people who belong to the Son. Such individuals are loved as they are ‘in him’.

This conception of a ‘representative’ eternal election in Christ is given even clearer expression in Calvin’s sermons on Ephesians 1. The fact that this choosing before the creation of the world was ‘in Christ’ is, says Calvin, confirmation of election’s complete gratuity. Here his repeated themes of God’s freedom in election and absence of foreseen merit due to inherent corruption receive their sharpest expression:

Did God, then, have an eye to us when he vouchsafed to love us? No! No! For then he would have utterly abhorred us. It is true that in regarding our miseries he had pity and compassion on us to relieve us, but that was because he had already loved us in our Lord Jesus Christ. God, then, must have had before him his pattern and mirror (patron et miroir) in which to see us, that is to say, he must have first looked on our Lord Jesus Christ before he could choose and call us.

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16 Comm. Ephesians (CNTC, vol. 11, p. 127); CO 51, p. 149.
18 Sermons on Ephesians, p. 33; CO 51, pp. 268-269.
We have already seen Calvin refer to Christ as a *speculum* in which we look to see God’s love for us. What is striking here, however, is that Christ is a mirror in which God looks to see us. Calvin will say that when we want to know God’s election, we must look at Christ; here he says that when God wanted to choose us, he looked at Christ. Although, interestingly, Calvin does not refer to Christ here as Mediator, this is a crystal clear description of Christ’s mediatorial role in election. It is followed by another graphic metaphor. Election is in Christ who is ‘the true register (*le vray registre*). For God’s vouchsafing to elect us ... from all eternity, was, as it were, a registering of us in writing. And the holy Scripture calls God’s election the book of life ... It is in him that we are written down and acknowledged by God as his children.’

This is how Calvin describes Christ as the object of election. As head of the elect, Christ is the representative of their election, the one whom God first chooses as the *locus* for the election of others. Christ mediates election itself, and it is an election that is prior to faith. In this mediation the biblical designation for Christ is the ‘beloved Son’; the metaphorical descriptions which Calvin employs are Christ as a ‘pledge’, a ‘mirror’, and a ‘register’. Mediating this election is Christ’s ‘primal mediatory work’, the *foundation* of the covenant history in which Christ mediates as prophet, priest and king. This is the eternal aspect of Christ’s two spheres of mediation. It is vital to note that eternal election is not an end in itself for Calvin but is merely the structural ground of the temporal work of salvation.

1.3. **Jesus Christ as the Mediator of salvation flowing from election**

In many ways Calvin is less concerned with describing Christ as the object of election than he is with describing him as the object of faith. It is not often that Calvin describes election in Christ without the issue of faith intruding on the discussion; election and faith stand in the closest possible connection to each other in his exegetical work.

This can be seen in his reading of John 6, where Calvin places Christ in relation to election in two key ways. The first is the portrayal of Christ in relation to the Father and

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19 *Sermons on Ephesians*, p. 33; CO 51, p. 269.
20 Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, p. 151.
the outworking of the decree. Throughout his comments on this chapter, Calvin variously describes Christ as ‘the living fountain flowing from the eternal Father’ (v.11), and as ‘author of this great blessing’ (v.27), or as ‘author of life’ (v.33). Such depictions are less claims about Christ’s divine essence than they are claims about his office of Mediator in time. The effect is to position Christ in relation to the Father in a way which guarantees the authority and efficacy of his mediation. So on 6.27 and the Father’s ‘sealing’ of the Son, Calvin’s understanding is that Christ is not discussing here his ‘eternal essence’ but rather ‘declares that these duties had been placed on him by the Father, and that this decree of the Father was manifested by an engraven seal.’

In this context, where Jesus is describing himself as the source of food which gives eternal life, the meaning is this: ‘Christ comes forward, and pledging himself as the author of this great blessing (se autorem tanti boni promittens), adds that he is approved by God and has been sent to men with this mark of sealing.’ The sense is similar in v.33 where Calvin says: ‘We have divine life in Christ, because he has come from God to be the author of life to us (ut nobis sit autor vitae).’ However, this depiction of Christ as author follows v.32 ‘it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven’. There, Calvin argues, Jesus says that ‘his Father, rather than he himself, is the author of this gift (Christus autem patrem potius quam se huius doni autorem facit) to gain more reverence – as if he were saying, “Acknowledge me as God’s minister by whose hand he wishes to feed your souls for eternal life.”’

It is interesting to see Calvin use the word ‘author’ as a description of Christ in a way that is markedly different from his use of the word in his comments on John 13.18. There the use was an argument for Christ’s divinity. Here, however, it is used to express a functional subordination of Christ to his Father which places him in a direct line of mediated authority. If the Father is the ultimate author of life, then Christ is the means the Father has given us of accessing this life and so is called the author as well. This is

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21 Comm. John (CNTC, vol. 4, p. 154); CO 47, p. 140.
22 Comm. John, p. 154; CO 47, p. 140.
Calvin’s conception of Christ as the executor of the decree. It comes to fuller expression as the Johannine narrative progresses towards the issue of those whom the Father has given to the Son. In John 6.37-40 the actions of the Father and the Son are paramount in relation to election and Calvin has a clear conception of how we should understand the workings of both: ‘faith is God’s work, by which he shows that we are his and appoints his Son to be the overseer of our salvation’ (v.38).25 Here Jesus says that he has come from heaven to do his Father’s will. Calvin states:

The distinction that Christ makes between his own and his Father’s will is an accommodation to his hearers because, since man’s mind is prone to distrust, we are wont to invent something contrary that makes us doubtful. To take away all excuse for such wicked imaginings, Christ declares that he has been manifested to the world to confirm what the Father has decreed on our salvation by actually effecting it (se mundo exhibitum fuisse asserit, ut ratum faciat ipso effectu quod de salute nostra decrevit pater).26

The fact that Jesus has come from heaven to do the Father’s will means that a wedge may not be driven between their actions – although there is a distinction, there is nevertheless the closest possible correlation between the work of the Father and the work of the Son. The Father wills salvation in the Son, and this is what the Son has come to achieve.

This brings us to the second way in which Calvin here describes Christ in relation to election. By entering the world to do the Father’s will, Christ stands as faith’s object in salvation. Calvin introduces this with his comment on v.39: ‘He now declares that the Father’s purpose is that believers may find salvation secured in Christ.’27 Calvin depicts Christ as the ‘guardian of our salvation (salutis nostrae custodem)’ because Christ protects the elect and will bring them ‘from the starting point to the finishing post’.28

However, in discussing v.40 (‘This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day), Calvin moves from salvation’s protector to salvation’s mode: obeying the gospel of Christ. The spotlight now falls very explicitly on the issue of faith and response to Christ. The verse proves to be immensely important for Calvin’s doctrine of election, bringing together as it does the Son’s obedience to the Father’s will while also locating the focus of the Father’s will on the Son himself. Two issues in particular stand out in Calvin’s treatment.

First, he is adamant at this point that faith is the basis for a sufficient knowledge of election:

If God’s will is that those whom he has elected shall be saved by faith, and he confirms and executes his eternal decree in this way, whoever is not satisfied with Christ but inquires curiously about eternal predestination desires, as far as lies in him, to be saved contrary to God’s purpose. The election of God in itself is hidden and secret. The Lord manifests it by the calling with which he honours us.  

The specific reason that is given here for not inquiring into the hidden, eternal decree is the connection in the divine will between election and faith. The latter is the means God has willed for noetic access to the former. This means that, secondly, Calvin is here introducing a significant nuance into his view of God’s election of individuals. The nuance is that their election is not the only thing that God has decreed for them; he has also decreed their faith. In a remarkable passage, he asserts:

Therefore they are mad who seek their own or others’ salvation in the labyrinth of predestination, not keeping to the way of faith displayed to them. Indeed, by this wrong-headed speculation they attempt to overthrow the

\[29\text{ Comm. John, p. 162; CO 47, p. 147.}\]
\[30\text{ Comm. John, p. 162; CO 47, p. 147.}\]
power and effect of predestination; for if God has elected us to the end that we may believe, take away faith and election will be imperfect. But it is wrong to break the unbroken and ordained order of beginning and end in God’s counsel.\textsuperscript{31}

What is striking about this is the supreme importance it attaches to faith in Christ as the mediator of salvation. Election is not alone. The decree is never merely a decree of certain ends but rather carries within it a sequence of means whereby the end of election is achieved. Christ mediates the salvation that flows from eternal election by being the object of the elect person’s faith. Calvin continues:

Moreover, since the election of God carries his calling with it by an inseparable bond, so when God has effectually called us to faith in Christ it should have as much force with us as if he confirmed his decree concerning our salvation with an engraven seal. For the testimony of the Spirit is nothing but the sealing of our adoption. Therefore every man’s faith is an abundant witness to the eternal predestination of God.\textsuperscript{32}

For Calvin, then, both election and the faith which come from God’s calling the elect to Christ stand together as one inseparable reality. They are executed separately – election in eternity, calling to faith in time – but we may not consider one without the other. Precisely because election comes with faith annexed to it, faith in Christ is a valid basis for assurance of election. It is clear that the issue of assurance of salvation is lying not far beneath the surface of Calvin’s exegesis here, and the matter raises its head repeatedly in Calvin’s treatments of Christ and election. In his third sermon on Ephesians,

\textsuperscript{31} Comm. John, p. 162 (emphasis added); CO 47, p. 147. Parker’s translation omits two clauses of Calvin’s Latin which I have translated above: propositam sibi fidei viam non tenentes. Imo praepostera hac speculatione vim praedestinationis et effectum evertere conantur.

\textsuperscript{32} Comm. John, p. 162; CO 47, p. 147.
in answer to the question of how a believer may know her election, Calvin answers simply:

By believing in Jesus Christ. I said before that faith proceeds from election and is the fruit of it, which shows that the root is hidden within. Whosoever then believes is thereby assured that God has worked in him, and faith is, as it were, the duplicate copy (la foi est comme le double) that God gives us of the original of our adoption (l’original de nostre adoption). God has his eternal counsel, and he always reserves to himself the chief and original record (l’original, et comme le principal registre) of which he gives us a copy by faith.33

This explicit connection between election and assurance is one of the clearest indicators of how Christ functions as the temporal mediator of salvation for Calvin. Tracing his doctrine of election along a ‘time-line’, we begin in eternity with election in Christ. While election is properly described as decreed by the Father, Calvin is clear that Christ also participates in the choosing. This is a choosing of people to belong to him. As we move along the line and enter the world of created reality, we encounter a universal calling of the gospel which is made effective in the hearts of the elect. Here they come to faith in Christ, and experience regeneration and adoption into God’s family. Further along the line – logically, but not necessarily temporally – this faith in Christ carries with it the testimony of the Spirit in the hearts of the elect so that as they look to Christ, the mirror of their own election, the Spirit seals the assurance of their salvation to them. The work of Christ which begins in eternity with eternal election, reaches its temporal culmination in his mediation of assurance of this election by means of faith in him. ‘With Calvin, election has to do with the surprise that one is safe with God, is ultimately secure. That is the heart of the doctrine.’34 Christ stands as Mediator over both election and assurance – election is in him and known in him.

33 Sermons on Ephesians, p. 47; CO 51, p. 281.
34 Van der Kooi, As in a Mirror, p. 165.
Richard Muller argues that Calvin’s concept of Christ predestined as head of the elect represents a significant development within the Augustinian and medieval tradition. Whereas in that tradition it is not so much ‘the person of the mediator that is predestined but only the abstraction of the human nature ... Calvin attempts to move beyond this doctrine to a conception involving the whole person of Christ, the concrete, historical mediatoris persona.’³⁵ ‘This aspect of predestination represents the eternal pole of Calvin’s Christology – it happens before time and is focused on the divine Son. Nevertheless, ‘Calvin speaks of the person of Christ as Deus manifestatus in carne. There is no speculative consideration of the natures apart from their union in the person. Calvin must depart from a doctrine which examines the predestination of an abstract humanity which does not exist apart from their union in the person.’³⁶ It is to the person of Christ, accessible to us in time by virtue of the union of natures, that we must direct our attention. The predestination of the person, in carne, roots Calvin’s emphasis firmly in the temporal sphere.

This means that it is the realm of Christ’s temporal mediation and the issues which surface in temporal salvation – faith, merit, cause – which are Calvin’s real focus in his doctrine of election. The focus is on where we must look and what we must know in order to understand election. To be sure, Christ’s eternal mediatio is vitally important, but it is so less because of the knowledge it gives about the trinitarian ground of election and more because of the knowledge it gives of free and certain salvation. The constant refrain in his Ephesians commentary and sermons is that election in Christ proves beyond all doubt that election is free, given humankind’s inherent corruption. Calvin’s concern is not to make Christ as object the content of the decree, but rather to make Christ as object the ground of the decree’s gratuity. Simply put, Calvin has a lot more to say about how Christ mediates an election that is learnt by faith in temporal salvation than he does about how Christ mediates this election in the first place.

2. Calvin, Christ and election in theological perspective

³⁵ Muller, Christ and the Decree, p. 37.
³⁶ Muller, Christ and the Decree, p. 37.
I will now consider three issues which show the contribution of Calvin’s exegetical material to interpretations of his theology from different perspectives. The weight of emphasis will fall on considering Christ as the subject of election, for although this is a minority report in Calvin it has been a recurring point of contention and confusion in interactions with his theology.

2.1. The reception of Calvin in Barth’s doctrine of election
At the start of this essay, I alluded to the problems that the neglect of Calvin’s exegesis has caused for the interpretation of his theology. A prominent example is the reception of Calvin’s doctrine of election in Barth’s constructive treatment of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. Barth is critical of Calvin for not assigning a role to Christ as the active subject in election.

[Calvin’s] reference to Christ as the one who executed the *beneplacitum* is only an answer to the *beneplacitum* if the *beneplacitum* as such is understood to be Christ’s, if Christ is already thought of not merely as the executive instrument of the divine dealings with man ordained in election but as the Subject of election itself. But Calvin was not prepared to think of him in this way.37

Barth will later say that Calvin’s failure to perceive that we can have no assurance of our own election (if Jesus Christ is merely an elected means whereby the electing God executes the decree) is ‘the decisive objection which we have to bring against his whole doctrine of predestination.’38

There are strong grounds for thinking that Barth has missed in Calvin’s John commentary a significant piece of evidence that Calvin did indeed hold a position like the one Barth is expounding. Barth asserts that, although falling short, Calvin did come

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37 *Church Dogmatics* II/2, eds G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), pp. 66-67 (hereafter *CD*).
38 *CD* II/2, p. 111.
‘appreciably near’ to an understanding of Christ as the active subject of election, and he refers to Calvin’s exposition of John 13 and 15. However, the words Barth says we read in that exposition come from the *Institutes*, not the commentary: *sibi ius elegendi communiter vindicat cum Patre ... Se Christus electionis facit autorem.*\(^{39}\) In *Inst. III.xxii.7*, straight after Barth’s Latin quotation, the references to John 13.18 and 15.19 are given and these are the two references Barth himself cites in parentheses. So it seems likely that at this point Barth’s references to John simply follow the citations given in the *Institutes* and therefore that Barth was basing his view of Calvin on this section of the *Institutes*, not the commentary. Although *Inst. III.xxii.7* does provide warrant for a view of Christ as the active subject of eternal election, this pre-temporal sense is not explicit and could be missed; it is certainly not the main point of Calvin’s argument in this section.\(^{40}\) Perhaps Barth takes Calvin to be discussing the choosing of the disciples in the sense of their temporal appointment to office, and so he claims that Calvin simply does not follow this thought to its proper conclusion. This may be what leads Barth to claim that Calvin is only ‘appreciably near’ to articulating the eternal aspect of Christ’s election.\(^{41}\) But the concept of Christ choosing *a se* in the clear sense of *ante mundi creationem* is crystal clear in Calvin’s commentary and might be deemed sufficient to cast Calvin’s overall position in a different light than that suggested by Barth. Further uncertainty over Barth’s argument arises here from a mistake in Barth’s citation of John 13.8 instead of 13.18 – this error is present in both the original German and the English

\(^{39}\) *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, eds P. Barth, W. Niesel, and D. Scheuner; 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926-52), vol. 4, p. 387 (hereafter *OS*).


\(^{41}\) *CD II/2*, p. 67.
translation—so that again it seems Barth is copying these biblical references from Calvin with a slip of the pen, rather than studying them in Calvin.

What are we to make of Barth’s oversight here? At first glance this exegetical material appears to lend weight to Muller’s claim that ‘Barth has not fully discerned the relation of Christ to the decrees in Calvin’s theology.’ In a response to Muller, however, Bruce McCormack has suggested that, far from overturning Barth’s critique, finding the Son as the eternal subject of election in Calvin only confirms Barth’s fears about the Deus nudus absconditus. This is because, according to McCormack, Calvin’s understanding of the eternal Son as subject is simply that of a ‘contentless placeholder in a system of thought’—the Son’s eternal identity is undetermined by his identity as Mediator in time.

McCormack sees with Barth that there are varieties of belief in the Son as the subject of election. According to Barth, not everyone means the same thing by this concept, and this much is clear in his small print excursus in CD II/2 when he comes across examples of it in the tradition. So to find the eternal Son as subject in Calvin is not automatically to find a conceptually precise answer to Barth’s critique. Nevertheless, McCormack’s claim that Calvin’s view of the eternal Son is that of a ‘contentless

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42 Die kirchliche Dogmatik II/2 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1942), p. 71; CD II/2, p. 67.

43 It is possible, however, that Barth is in fact reading this Institutes material as describing Christ as author of eternal election. If so, then he is unduly dismissive of what he finds. Barth’s reading pits Christ as author of election against God beginning a se ipso in election (rather than a Christo), and he claims that the latter supersedes the former in Calvin’s thought (cf. CD II/2, pp. 66-67). But it is more helpful to ask why and how Calvin’s exegesis led him to hold both positions in harmony.

44 Muller, Christ and the Decree, p. 190 n. 62.


46 CD II/2, pp. 106-115.
placeholder’ is open to question. It assumes that the Son is only determined if he is
determined by election in all the ways he (or Barth) claims the Son should be. If Calvin’s
exegesis of John 13.18 confirms that in the Institutes Calvin sees Christ as the author of
eternal election, then we note that there Calvin says Christ ‘claims for himself, in
common with the Father, the right to choose (ius elegendi).’ Does not this ius elegendi
revealed by the Son incarnatus say something about the eternal Son? It seems to suggest
that he at least possesses equality with the Father, as well as authority and power; perhaps
also wisdom and love. Paul Helm explains the manner of continuity between the eternal
and incarnate Son in Calvin’s thought like this: the incarnate Christ is a ‘fit, consistent, or
appropriate expression’ of the character of the Logos asarkos, and not merely of his
omnipotence but also of his moral character.

So I suggest that Calvin’s exegetical material serves to inject a modest dose of
cautions – whether by Barth or by McCormack – that Calvin’s eternal Son has
an ‘identity shrouded in darkness’. It seems to be a claim which advances too far
beyond the recognition that Calvin and Barth have different conceptions of the
determination of the Son. Had Barth seen all that there is to see in Calvin on Christ and
election, he probably would still not have regarded it as an adequate position. But it is
hard to judge precisely what Barth would have made of Calvin’s exegesis had he engaged

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47 Inst. III.xxii.7, p. 940 (emphasis added); OS 4, p. 387.
Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives (Grand Rapids:
49 McCormack, ‘Christ and the Decree’, p. 134. It could also be the case that there is
more to Barth’s conception of the subject of election than emerges in McCormack’s
suggestion that Barth regarded the eternal Son as subject as an example of the Deus
nudus absconditus. Cf. G. Hunsinger, ‘Election and the Trinity: Twenty-five theses on
the theology of Karl Barth’, Modern Theology 24.2 (2008), pp. 179-198. Alive to the
senses in which Jesus Christ is the subject of election, Hunsinger nevertheless contends
that for Barth ‘strictly speaking, it is the eternal Son, not the Son incarnatus, nor even the
Son incarnandus, who is the subject’ (p. 183).
it. Perhaps the most we can say is simply that Barth’s reading of the tradition should have been different than it is.

2.2. **Election and the extra Calvinisticum**

The *extra Calvinisticum* is better referred to as the ‘so-called’ *extra* because, as E. David Willis has shown, ‘A distinction must be made between “extra Calvinisticum” as a term and the so-called extra Calvinisticum as a doctrine’. The latter did not originate with Calvin and indeed, according to Willis, might properly be called the *extra Patristicum* or *extra Catholicum*. This existing Catholic doctrine came to play a critical role in Eucharistic debates between the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so that the ‘Calvinistic *extra*’ became a Lutheran term of derision. The *extra* taught the Son’s existence ‘beyond’ (*extra*) the flesh of Jesus Christ. Whereas in Lutheran Christology Christ’s flesh receives ubiquity by virtue of the hypostatic union, the Reformed argued that this conception threatened the integrity of the human nature. It was better, they held, to regard the human nature as limited spatially and the divine nature as retaining its essential properties, such as omnipresence, impassibility and immensity.

To explain the function of the *extra* in Calvin, Willis argues that Calvin operates with a double sense to the designation of Christ as ‘Mediator’. Christ is both head of the angels and expiator of sin: ‘Christ as Eternal Son mediated the divine ordering of the universe from its beginning; Christ as Eternal Son manifested in the flesh performed the reconciling work without the cessation or diminution of his mediation of the divine ordering of the universe.’ On this basis, Willis provides a colourful description of the incarnation as operating primarily in political terms in Calvin – it is ‘a reassertion of

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51 Ibid., p. 60.

52 For Calvin’s own articulation of the *extra*, cf. *Inst.* II.xiii.4, p. 481; cf. also *Inst.* IV.xvii.30, pp. 1401-3, where Calvin refers to the *extra* again in his discussion of the Supper.

53 Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology*, p. 71.
Christ’s empire over that part of creation that had rebelled’, and ‘the Son of God left heaven only in such a way that he continued to exercise his dominion over it; the Incarnation was the extension of his empire, not the momentary abdication of it’.\textsuperscript{54} In this way, creation and redemption are inseparably connected in the work of Christ: ‘Redemption is the restoration and reformation of man and the world into a proper order.’\textsuperscript{55} The significance of this connection, and the impact of the \textit{extra Calvinisticum} at this point in Calvin’s thought, is expressed by Willis like this: ‘The continuity of gracious order over creaturely attempts at discontinuity depends on the identity of the Redeeming Mediator in the flesh with the Mediator who is the Eternal Son of God by whom, and with whose Spirit, all things were created according to the Father’s will.’\textsuperscript{56} Thus the \textit{extra} reveals continuity between the two spheres of Christ’s headship – just as he always was and remained head of the angels even in his incarnation, so now in his incarnation that headship is extended to creatures who had spurned it.

When Willis touches on Calvin’s doctrine of election, however, he overlooks Calvin’s comments on John 13.18, and so misses a significant application of his insights about the \textit{extra}. For Willis, Calvin is in danger of jeopardising the revelation of God in Christ by prioritising in election ‘a will of God to which Christ’s revelation is subject, and a will which is discoverable by us outside the Deus manifestatus in carne.’\textsuperscript{57} In this scheme the revelation of Christ is subject to a two-fold eternal decision of either salvation or damnation, and Willis highlights that the incarnate Christ does not make known why this decision is two-fold.

Calvin would doubtless have agreed that Christ does not reveal the reason for the double decree but, given his exegesis of John 13.18 (and 15.16), it is hard to see how he would concur with a conception of God’s electing will to which Christ’s revelation is merely subject. On the contrary, by omitting the fact that for Calvin election is by Christ and in common with the Father \textit{ante mundi creationem}, Willis does not see how \textit{election}

\textsuperscript{54} Willis, \textit{Calvin’s Catholic Christology}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{55} Willis, \textit{Calvin’s Catholic Christology}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{56} Willis, \textit{Calvin’s Catholic Christology}, pp. 99-100.
\textsuperscript{57} Willis, \textit{Calvin’s Catholic Christology}, p. 117.
displays continuity between the Son’s eternal, universal headship and his extension of that headship into space-time history. For if in the incarnation the eternal Son continued to exercise his dominion over creation by the work of redemption, then a clear feature of Calvin’s exegesis is that it attributes to Christ, according to his divine nature, an active role in the eternal basis of that temporal redemption. Or, approached from a different angle, we may ask: what is the causal ground of the extension of Christ’s headship to rebellious creatures in redemption? The answer is the free and gracious decree of election, and Calvin’s Johannine exegesis shows Christ himself active in that decree. So at the point where Willis suggests Christ’s revelation is subordinate to the will of God, Calvin shows the revelation of the eternal Son manifest in the flesh to be a revelation of the electing will of the eternal Son. The Son is wholly given as he redeems his people in the execution of the decree, even as the Son cannot be wholly subsumed under the decree because it is an extension of his own divine headship. Christ as the author of election shows that the extension of his headship in time is continuous with the divine will – his own divine will – which orders the universe in creation and redemption. We may say that it is in the revelation of election (via the extra conceptuality) that Calvin shows Christ exercising a dominion par excellence that he had never ceased to exercise.

2.3. Calvin and ‘christocentrism’

Bruce McCormack has argued that if we follow Barth’s critique of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination then Calvin cannot be thought of as a christocentric theologian because his ‘doctrine of predestination is not decisively controlled by Christology’. If Christ is only the divinely appointed means for the execution of the decree then Christology does not determine the being of the divine subject of election, and so ‘Calvin’s doctrine of

58 Cf. Muller’s comments on the extra and John 13.18 (Christ and the Decree, p. 25 and p. 190 n. 65; cf. pp. 37-38 and p. 196 n. 158, where Muller also draws attention to Calvin on John 17.6-8).

59 McCormack, ‘Christ and the Decree’, p. 130. He nicely documents the rise of a ‘christocentric’ reading of Calvin, from Jacobs and Niesel through to Wendel and Dowey, including Barth’s own critique of this reading (pp. 126-32).
predestination leaves God lost in a shroud of agnosticism."McCormack further argues that if we follow Richard Muller’s reading of Calvin then ‘the last thing that can be maintained is that Calvin is a “christocentric” theologian.’ This is because ‘predestination is the ground of Christology rather than the other way around’, and because it is the divine decree which leads to ‘Nestorian tendencies resident in the Christology of Muller’s Calvin.’ There is space here to register only two brief observations on this line of critique.

First, taking up McCormack’s exposition of ‘christocentrism’ on Barth’s terms, and based on what we have seen of Christ as the subject of election in Calvin’s exegesis, I suggest that, strictly speaking, it is not altogether fair to write off Calvin’s doctrine of election as not being properly christocentric. There is clearly a sense in which the Christ revealed in the economy is not just a means of executing the decree but is the author of eternal election.

This leads to the second point. There is a pressing need in discussions like this to recalibrate the term ‘christocentrism’ as applied to Calvin’s theology by attending to possible distinctions within christocentric theologies. In historical terms, there is not only one form of christocentrism. Muller has recently argued that ‘The problem that underlies much of the historiography in which the notion of christocentricity has been applied to past eras, perhaps, most notably, to the understanding of the Reformation, is the interpretive use of an exclusively twentieth-century notion of christocentrism as a means for evaluating the theology of the past.’ In this article Muller develops his earlier distinction between the ‘soteriological’ christocentrism of Calvin and the Reformed orthodox, and the ‘principal’ christocentrism of nineteenth and twentieth century theologies. The former places Christ at the historical and theological centre of the work of redemption as a means of opposing all synergistic and anthropological approaches to salvation; the latter may include this monergism but moves beyond it to make Christ the

60 McCormack, ‘Christ and the Decree’, p. 131.
62 Muller, ‘A Note on “Christocentrism” and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology’, *WTJ* 68.2 (2006), pp. 253-260 (pp. 256-257).
cognitive foundation of theology, a role occupied (according to Muller) by Scripture in Reformed orthodoxy.\footnote{Muller, \textit{After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 97-98.} I suggest that Calvin’s and Barth’s doctrines of election are brilliant examples of the influence that these two different forms of christocentrism exert within their theologies.\footnote{These distinctions frame my argument in \textit{Reading the Decree}, where I also develop a further distinction at the hermeneutical level: Calvin’s biblical interpretation is christologically \textit{extensive}, Barth’s is \textit{intensive}.}

On these terms, then, while I recognise that what I have argued to be Calvin’s view of Christ and election will not be theologically satisfying for anyone adopting McCormack’s reading of Barth, the question is: why should it have to be so to count as ‘christocentric’? The issue is not one of personal preference, of favouring either Calvin’s or Barth’s position. Rather it has to do with the accuracy and fairness of historical description. McCormack’s reading assumes that there is only one way to be a christocentric theologian. The result is that the breadth of Calvin’s doctrine of election is viewed only through the narrow lens of Barth’s identification of the subject of the divine decision. Yet Christ is described in relation to election in such a wide variety of ways that it simply is not possible to describe Calvin’s doctrine of election without also reaching for his doctrines of the person and work of Christ. This is not christocentrism as Barth knows it – but it does not need to be to qualify as one historical example of the attempt to think about Christian doctrine in relation to the \textit{Deus manifestatus in carne}.\footnote{I am very grateful to Professor Paul Helm, Dr Suzanne McDonald and Dr Rob Price for their comments on a previous draft of this article.}