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Reframing the Relevance of Calvinism and the Reformed Tradition for 21st Century Bioethics

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Many in academic bioethics worry that robust theological traditions, when articulated in the public square, damage the prospect of serious reflection about tough cases. Here we challenge that prevailing exclusion-by-default methodological impulse by correcting prevalent stereotypes about one particular Christian tradition that may offer relevant conceptual resources for bioethics. We briefly examine the man, John Calvin, and the Calvinist/Reformed Protestant tradition to show how it has been misconstrued in academic bioethics but can be reconstrued as a constructive, substantive theological starting point for tough bioethical questions of our age. Core Calvinist doctrines about the nature of an all-sovereign God and human beings' relation to that God, as well as related prominent themes from elements of the broader Reformed tradition, including the glory/sovereignty/majesty of God; the created goodness of the world; human beings as desiring/worshiping/image-bearing creatures; the pervasive influence of sin; the limitations of humanity for self-improvement; the completely gratuitous nature of redemption; the comprehensiveness of God's redemptive purposes; and the pending final completion of his redemptive work could and should influence the tone and content of moral deliberation that can be a positive influence on twenty-first-century bioethics.

Keywords: *bioethics, Calvinism, Reformed*

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern bioethics is full of tough, messy cases that require serious reflection and difficult judgments. Consider the recent Schiavo and Ashley cases

(Hook and Mueller, 2005; Terry and Campbell, 2008), not to mention major policy questions—stem cells, abortion, the right to health care—that have polarized our society. These and other big issues call for modes of moral deliberation that can engage, struggle with, and sort through problems with nuance and rigor. Some leading thinkers in bioethics, following popular political theorists, worry that offering moral reasons arising from "comprehensive doctrines" in the public square of our field will damage the prospect for serious reflection and difficult judgments called for by tough cases (Daniels, 2000). They worry that deliberation that starts from robust moral traditions—those that offer a detailed, comprehensive conception of human flourishing, particularly those arising from faith traditions—inevitably subvert, distort, or silence *serious* deliberation about questions that they perceive as inherently ambiguous.[1] In the sphere of academic bioethics, therefore, committed belief is often equated with simple-minded, rigid, racist, chauvinistic, knuckleheaded, or backward modes of thought unbecoming of the field.

Many in academic bioethics hold this default stance for sociological as much as philosophical reasons. "We" in academic bioethics think we know what "religious people" are like. A modern gentleperson's bioethics (as it were) armed with a smidgen of Rawls and a dash of Enlightenment bashfulness about such "private" matters can go on for decades ignoring such perspectives. So long as this mix of purportedly unassailable political philosophy mixes with a cultural stereotype about what confessional faith looks like, one can go on ignoring the claims of confessional faith traditions—some of whose adherents have admittedly exhibited less than desirable moral attributes in a degree sufficient to substantiate the above stereotypes.

In this paper (and throughout this theme issue), we challenge that prevailing exclusion-by-default methodological impulse by countering prevalent stereotypes about one particular Christian tradition that may offer relevant conceptual resources for bioethics. We examine Calvinism to show how it has been misconstrued in academic bioethics and sketch out how it and the broader "Reformed" Protestant tradition might be construed as a constructive, substantive theological starting point for tough bioethical questions of our age.[2] Here we briefly sketch the life and practice of the seventeenth-century reformer from whom this tradition draws its name and then describe major theological themes/impulses in Calvinist theology and social thought. Moreover, we will demonstrate how Calvinism and the Reformed tradition in particular may offer confessional Christians a vocabulary for addressing tough questions collegially and constructively in the midst of disagreement, as well as naming the possibility for at least partial agreement with other non-Christian traditions in the fallen present world of bioethics while fully embracing the distinctiveness of that robust confessional identity.

The argument has two layers. In the first layer, we argue that Calvinism and the Reformed tradition should have a seat at the table in bioethics discourse even if one accepts the flawed ground rules of the field's methodological biases. In the second layer, however, we submit a broad outline of what Calvinists and Reformed voices might actually bring to the table if given a seat. In so doing, we seek to open the discourse of bioethics to the possibility that many Christian traditions may offer compelling methodological and substantive resources for addressing the problems of modern bioethics. In our presentation, not all of the themes presented are exclusive to Calvinist and Reformed Christians but are consistent with and typically prominent in their thought and practice. After all, Calvinist and Reformed piety, dogma, and practice share much with other confessional Christian traditions dating back to Augustine. Nevertheless, the constellation of themes presented represent particular points of emphasis that have broadly been recognized as Calvinist and Reformed due to the degree to which they are stressed and focused on. Throughout, we hope to illustrate how at least one robust confessional Christian tradition can and ought to inform positively the field of bioethics for the twenty-first century.

II. CALVINISM: A SOURCE OF CONSTERNATION IN MODERN BIOETHICS

In his 1991 article, "American Moralism and the Origin of Bioethics in the United States," patron saint and founding father of modern bioethics, Al Jonsen, argues that the theology of John Calvin gave rise to American Moralism—a way of approaching moral problems in terms of absolute, clear principles, and one that avoids thoughtful, casuistic analysis (Jonsen, 1991). He argues that the bioethics movement in the United States was stimulated by this moralism and that although contemporary American popular morality bears few of those original dogmatic marks, it nevertheless continues to influence the discourse of bioethics through rule and principle-based reasoning. To paraphrase Jonsen, New England Puritans saw morality as inflexible and certain, rendering fixed and wooden judgments and thereby promoting an authoritarian approach to social life and morality. In turn, those Puritans, through nineteenth-century anti-intellectualist revivalists, twentieth-century fundamentalists, and then all the way down to undersecretaries in the first Bush White House, contaminated how US society grapples with tough moral questions: in a nonnuanced, nonproblem-solving approach and with a strident tone. He worries that a suspect "hearts and minds" approach to ethics, manifest in policies of the first Bush administration, actually began with Puritan Calvinists and persists in American Moralism today to the detriment of serious moral deliberation.

What is Jonsen's underlying concern? His concern is that the vocabulary of rule-based reasoning and the commitment to moral absolutes manifested in

the writings of New England Puritans had a corrosive effect beyond the particular content of the Calvinism they espoused. After all, Calvinist denominations have been a minority since the late nineteenth century. Jonsen stresses that the methods of Puritans, despite their doctrines falling out of favor with the American populace, nevertheless created a kind of fatal character flaw in the way Americans address moral questions. According to Jonsen, Americans have never recovered from this disabling methodological flaw. These are serious allegations, which, if substantiated, give a modern bioethics scholar pause in taking the theological claims and method of Calvinism seriously.

However, Jonsen's argument should be questioned in at least two ways. First, he propagates a truncated and skewed caricature of Calvinism based on contested assumptions. Jonsen equates the whole of Calvinism with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century interpretations of English and New England Puritans. While these communities inherited the theology of Calvin, they also had a particular historical context for their piety and practice that does not represent the whole of Calvinism. Moreover, Jonsen's analysis of Calvinism rests almost entirely on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of American Puritanism, replete with its own orthodoxy of presuppositions. David D. Hall's recent analysis suggests that the orthodoxy on which Jonsen's interpretation of Puritanism rests is not the last word on the matter (Hall, 2011). In that analysis, Hall calls particular attention to the way in which historical analyses of Puritans to date have focused on an "authoritarian" interpretation of New England social life. Hall's analysis shows how the social order of New England Puritans, while certainly prone to rules and personal piety, has a strongly egalitarian strain and a vision of collective social flourishing far more radical than that of English Puritans; it was even progressive for its time. At several points, Hall notes that the evolving seventeenth-century New England *ethos* included space for appeal to personal conscience and even methods of moral discernment that drew on casuistry (Hall, 2011, 112).

Moreover, the influences on American Moralism that Jonsen cites cannot be blamed so easily on Calvinism. Although second wave nineteenth-century revivalists such as Charles Finney propagated an anti-intellectualism, as did twentieth-century fundamentalists, the adherents of these movements were a mix of Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Anabaptists. Although many revivalists had roots in Calvinism (via congregationalism and Presbyterianism), as their following grew they were ridiculed by the Calvinist establishment for serious doctrinal departures from core tenets of Calvinism (Noll, 1995; Marsden, 2006).

Thus, Jonsen's historical analysis about Calvinism's toxic effects on American religion and culture rests on shaky, contested factual premises, which undermine his final conclusions on the origins of American Moralism. American Moralism may exist; blaming Calvinists for it based on his argument is a much more tenuous proposition. Nevertheless, in the zeitgeist of

professional, establishment bioethics, a brief sketch of a plausible historical account by an eminent leader in bioethics can lend credibility to a deep-seated worry by the second wave of professionalized bioethics scholars that religious traditions like Calvinism contaminated bioethics in America. The messiness of modern bioethics, spawned by technology, fueled by pluralism, and hamstrung by divisive politics does not sound like a setting ripe for ethical solutions drawn from the Calvinist playbook. In this sense, Jonsen's argument, however cursory and incomplete, serves to confirm the instincts of the bioethics establishment about the role of robust religious traditions in their field.

However, what if those instincts and the flawed arguments they co-opted are wrong? What if, moralism or not, dogmatic content-full theological traditions contain within them methodological and substantive resources that call for (or even require) struggling with the messiness of exactly the questions faced in modern bioethics? Then could these traditions (on Jonsen's terms) at least have a seat at the table?

Once at the table, Calvinists may then assert claims that are more or less agreeable to the mores of academic bioethics but that fact ought not to exclude them perforce from the conversation. To consider seriously the possibility of Calvinism and the Reformed tradition contributing constructively to twenty-first-century bioethics, one must be willing to rethink his impressions of such traditions. This would require encountering those traditions on their own terms—not as sound-bite abstractions but as complex traditions of persons, beliefs, practices, and ways of life. In short, in the case of Calvinism, one would have to begin by revisiting the person of John Calvin.

III. CALVIN, CALVINISM, AND THE REFORMED TRADITION

John Calvin was born in northern France in 1509. Raised in a Roman Catholic family, his father encouraged him to pursue the priesthood. When Calvin was twenty, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg church, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation and drawing young Calvin's attention. Four years later, as the theological teachings of the early reformers were spreading throughout Europe, Calvin began his university studies in Paris. Before long, he had formed friendships with a few reform-minded individuals (Bouwsma, 1989).

At age twenty-four, Calvin experienced a religious conversion that biographers believe corresponded with his break from the Roman Catholic Church. Just three years later, he published his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* a summary of his views on Christian theology (Calvin, 1845). This work, which was a small booklet of six chapters when first published, grew to four large volumes with eighty chapters before its final publication twenty-three years later. The essential theology and doctrines therein, however, remained unchanged throughout this period; Calvin

simply expanded it as he immersed himself in his study of the Bible and as he ministered to congregations in Geneva and Strasbourg.

The theologian B.B. Warfield aptly summarizes a primary feature of Calvin's writings: "whither the Bible took him, thither he went. Where scriptural declarations failed him, there he stopped short" (Warfield, 1909, 1). Behind this adoring aphorism stands a verifiable feature of the man, namely, that Calvin sought to know God principally through God's word—the Bible. Calvin was an advocate of what he called "learned ignorance." According to Calvin, one can study ad infinitum, but in the end human efforts can only get one so far; at that point, we must simply wonder over the mystery of the created world and worship its Creator. In Calvin's own words, "God would have us revere but not understand that through this he should also fill us with wonder" (Calvin, 1845, 739).

Calvin was also greatly concerned that his writings be accessible. Just as God accommodates himself to humanity in the Scriptures so that they can know him, so Calvin followed the same principle in seeking to accommodate his teachings to his audience. About this concept, Calvin wrote, "We must therefore consider what questions each is able to bear and accommodate our doctrine to the capacity of the individual" (Calvin, 1849, 432). The intended simplicity of Calvin's written language illustrates the final devotional objective of scholarship embodied in his personal motto—*Cor meum tibi offero Domine, prompte et sincere* ("my heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely").

The original subtitle of the *Institutes* was, "The whole sum of piety and whatever it is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation." Calvin defined piety as "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (Calvin, 1845, 47). In other words, knowledge of God's revealed truth is foundational to loving God, which ought to bear fruit in how a Christian lives. To quote Warfield once again, "it is not the head, but the heart, which Calvin primarily addresses in his theology" (Zaspel, 2012, 34). Whether his exhaustive final four-volume systematic theology and the generations of followers in subsequent Reformed traditions succeeded in achieving the devotional, heart-felt intent of Calvin (and not just a rationalistic theological system) is a worthy topic of debate. Nevertheless, the stated intent of his scholarship, teaching, and moral instruction was not discursive argumentation per se, but worship—i.e., directing regenerate and unregenerate humanity toward a posture of reverence and wonder about the providential ordering of all things.

Along those same lines, Calvin did not write within the confines of an academic environment divorced from the world around him. As one biographer puts it, "The *Institutes* was not written in an ivory tower, but against the background of teething troubles" (Parker, 1954, 80). He had two children from his marriage to a widow whose care could not be ignored, though their own children died in infancy (Petersen, 1986). He ministered to the people

of Geneva and Strasbourg by preaching every Sunday and delivering lectures daily in cities full of social problems and in a religious environment rife with controversy. He sheltered refugees from other countries and equipped them to bring reformed teachings back to their homes. Thus, his theology was rooted in daily piety, family life, and community with a way of life that affirmed in practice the dominion of an all-powerful Creator about whom he was writing and preaching.

Calvin's self-described identity as a follower of Christ informed and shaped every aspect of his life and work. His avowed love for and devotion to Christ led him to seek to help others know and understand better their created nature and their Creator's loves. He was concerned about declaring truth as revealed in the Scriptures. This truth so captivated him that he—a scholar, a minister, and a father—could rejoice over things as routine as the rich green color of a blade of grass. The search for truth for Calvin was, finally, an expression of and for deepening his devotion.

The theology, piety, and practices that arose from John Calvin's influence took shape and blossomed throughout Europe, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, England, and Scotland, traveled eventually to North America, and gave rise to what is now referred to as the "Reformed tradition." In addition to adhering to several important theological doctrines of salvation (the so-called "doctrines of grace"), sacramental distinctives, and eschatology, Calvinism and the Reformed tradition spawned diverse ways of life in Europe especially (Bouwsma, 1989). Now, four hundred years after the birth of its namesake, Calvinism and the Reformed tradition embody a diverse and distinct set of theological doctrines, as well as diverse interpretations of what those teachings imply for politics, social theory, philosophy, and church practice on different continents over several centuries.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the task of naming *the* Calvinist position on a given societal problem is a particular challenge. Nevertheless, the centuries of theological reflection, social thought, and Christian practice that fit under this umbrella do provide important themes that shed light on the potential of Calvinism to inform and address the messy moral problems of twenty-first-century bioethics.

IV. MAJOR THEOLOGICAL TENETS

In his book entitled *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, H. Henry Meeter (and subsequent edition reviser Paul A. Marshall) outline both the theological and political ideas of Calvinism and the Reformed tradition. Here, briefly, by way of overview, we focus on the Fundamental Principle (chapter 1) and Main Theological Tenets (chapter 5) presented there (Meeter, 1990).

According to Meeter, Calvinism as a system of thought can be considered "a revival of Augustinianism, which … was … a revival of the teachings of St. Paul" (Meeter, 1990, 15). In this system, the fundamental interest is in the

character and nature of God. This leads directly to Calvinism's unswerving preoccupation with the sovereignty of God:

> The central thought of Calvinism is, therefore, the great thought of God. Someone has remarked: 'Just as the Methodist places in the foreground the idea of salvation of sinners, the Baptist – the mystery of regeneration, the Lutheran – justification by faith, the Moravian – the wounds of Christ, the Greek Catholic—the mysticism of the Holy Spirit, and the Romanist – the catholicity of the church, so the Calvinist is always placing in the foreground the thought of God' (Meeter, 1990, 17).

In other words, Calvinism's fundamental principle stresses the "supremacy of God" in all things. Meeter quotes Warfield,

> The Calvinist is the man who sees God behind all phenomena and in all that occurs, working out His will; who makes the attitude of the soul to God in prayer its permanent attitude in all its life-activities; and who casts himself on the grace of God alone, excluding every trace of dependence on self from the whole work of his salvation (Meeter, 1990, 19).

This may differ from what a casual observer of Calvinism—prone to attribute Calvinism's fundamental principle to "predestination"—might think. But, as Meeter shows, predestination is a logical consequence of and not the starting point for Calvinism. When human responsibility is faced in moral matters, the Calvinist rests on the character of God as God: "even when his own logic fails to give an adequate account … he accepts full responsibility of man … [but] the sovereignty of God is prior to the responsibility of man" (Meeter, 1990, 22). This fundamental principle gives rise to a whole worldview derived from the Scriptures, which a Calvinist claims is the revealed truth of that sovereign God:

> The Bible, as revelation of God, teaches the following facts of basic significance to the Calvinist system: that God, who has revealed himself in his Word, is sovereign over all things, and that God differs essentially from all things created by him; that religion, or the relation of God to his image-bearer, man, is of the nature of a covenant, and as such was already specially revealed to original man in the state of righteousness; that the world today does not exist in a pure state but is fallen in sin… is totally depraved and that the world, over which God placed him as ruler, exists today in a corrupt state as a result of sin; that death has come into the world as a punishment for sin; and that the sovereign God has revealed his grace, which affects both individual and social conditions, in the divinely given Mediator, Jesus Christ (Meeter, 1990, 23).

This worldview also gives rise to particular theological tenets discussed in chapter 5 of Meeter's book. First, the Bible is the book of God—speaking of God's plans and purposes for salvation but also man's duty in all of life (Meeter, 1990, 44). Second, humanity is "totally depraved," unable to do any good and inclined to all wickedness. He continues, "Whatever good you see anywhere in the world, in society, art, science, political life, even in pagan lands, the Calvinist ascribes directly to God as its source, not the sinful heart of man" (Meeter, 1990, 45). This depraved state requires the

supernatural intervention of God's planned salvation earned in the person of Christ.

A third major tenet includes Calvinism's view of the Church and Spirit. The Holy Spirit "enlightens the mind so that the renewed man himself has sufficient clearness to know the way of salvation by the study of the Bible" (Meeter, 1990, 46). When it comes to church polity, "Because Christ is head of the church, he is the rightful and only sovereign to whose wishes all of the church must conform" (Meeter, 1990, 46–47). Thus, rulers in the church must adhere to obedient living while preserving liberty for individuals and local congregations:

> While the Roman Catholics place everything, state included, under the pope as head of the church, and Lutherans and others place the church under the state, the Calvinists fought with their lives for and finally won the liberty of the church from state control. They believe that God has delegated authority to state, church, and other social groups in such a way that each is autonomous in its own sphere (Meeter, 1990, 47).

The final category Meeter presents is morality. Although Catholics, Lutherans, and Anabaptists each stress a view of life in which there is a strong divide between sacred and secular spheres—a so-called "two kingdom" view—Calvinists and most of the Reformed tradition have argued for God's sovereignty in all spheres of life. By inference, the totality of life is "religious" and so reflects either obedience to or rebellion from God's all-encompassing sovereignty. Good works in all of life are a necessary and natural outgrowing of God's work of regeneration in his people. By implication, Calvinists stress dependency on the Holy Spirit to achieve any good works, continued dependence on God's providence, and man's helplessness apart from God to achieve any good.

Thus, the well-ordered moral life for the Calvinist oriented toward God requires obedience and covenantal obligation not to earn God's favor, but to humbly express gratitude to the supreme creator. The saving work that makes good works possible in the regenerate extends to all spheres of human life:

> Life as a whole must be God-directed; politics, social and industrial relations, domestic relations, education, science and art must all be God-centered. There is no domain of life in which high morals are not essential! God must control the whole of life. Not only individual but social ethics is stressed (Meeter, 1990, 48).

These major theological tenets of Calvinism form an important backdrop for how that perspective might influence deliberations in bioethics. Many of its themes are not unique to Calvinism but together form a pattern of emphasis that is distinctive among Christian confessional traditions.

V. THEMES FROM SUBSEQUENT REFORMED TRADITIONS

We now examine how themes from Reformed thought derived from Calvinist theology might constructively contribute to bioethics. Below, we briefly describe some major (largely uncontested) themes of Calvinist social thought

and then briefly summarize their implications for contemporary bioethics. The following themes have been emphasized in Reformed thought: the glory/sovereignty/majesty of God (previously discussed); the created goodness of the world; human beings as desiring/worshipping/image-bearing creatures; the pervasive influence of sin (encompassed in the concept of total depravity); the limitations of humanity for self-improvement apart from regeneration and the indwelling Holy Spirit; the complete dependence of man on God for redemption; the comprehensiveness of God's redemptive purposes for all of creation; the pending final completion of his redemptive work encapsulated in the term "already-but-not-yet".

In particular, in the last century, Reformed thought has spawned considerable discussion and influence not just about doctrines of grace and the character of God, but the implications of the Calvinist worldview for societal ordering. Calvinist social thought drawing on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century perspectives of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd highlight in a particularly poignant way the potential relevance of the broader Reformed tradition to contemporary moral dilemmas in bioethics. Their social thought over the last 120 years emphasizes concepts such as: the state as a providential gift tasked with rendering justice; the fact that due to fallen-ness, societies ought to avoid collections of power (sphere sovereignty); the reality that both humans *and* humanity matter (social solidarity aimed at the common good); and common grace.

Each of these deserves further attention, but here by way of introduction we will briefly touch on common grace. Common grace states that, even in our current state as fallen creatures separated from God due to our own sin, God providentially and graciously restrains evil and allows the light of created goodness to shine in all humanity even in the midst of its depravity. Common grace has been described as the means by which God continues to order and sustain all of creation, restrain evil, and allow his character to glimmer through the brokenness of his fallen creation. That creational goodness may entail some messiness:

> As Calvinists, we must seek the common good …. To endorse a common grace theology is to learn to live with some theological messiness. This ought not to trouble Calvinists, for whom the experience of theological messiness should be a healthy reminder of the ways in which all of our theological probings will eventually bring us to humble acknowledgment of the divine mysteries (Mouw, 2001).

To summarize large strands of Calvinist and Reformed social thought, human existence at present is under the reign of a once and future King, Jesus Christ, who has graciously allowed the present to persist for his own mysterious redemptive purposes. Human social institutions including family, church, and state are ordained but imperfect means of restraining human depravity and instantiating his final redemptive ends. If a key starting point for Calvinism is damnation due to the total depravity of humanity, its final story is ultimately

about a redemptive *transformation* of all creation. Looking forward to that time, human beings can humbly and joyously discharge and steward their duties within these spheres from their limited perspectives as finite creatures.

These themes deserve further elaboration beyond what we can cover here, but the key point of a Calvinist theological view of ethics and human nature is this: human beings are fallen, depraved lovers/worshippers first and foremost, whose affections must be aligned in accordance with their created nature and directed toward the heart of God, first through the transforming work of regeneration—repenting and believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—and then through the sustaining work of the Spirit via the means of grace—the Christian practices of prayer, scripture reading, and participation in the sacraments—all rooted in the almighty, sovereign God. By extension, then, human beings are not merely rational, autonomous preference-maximizers; any ethic that supposes this is misguided. In Calvinism and the Reformed tradition, a "hearts and minds" approach *is exactly* what the moral life is *and ought to be* about (here Jonsen's attribution is partly correct!). However, Calvinism does not preclude moral reasoning or serious grappling; rather, it acknowledges that moral judgments divorced from rightly ordered affections are unlikely to lead to moral insight. Contrary to Jonsen's inference that Calvinism precipitated an inevitable authoritarian, cookie-cutter approach to moral reasoning, implied in Calvinist theology is a posture of humility and an appreciation of mutual depravity in the face of a majestic Creator. This posture affects all of us engaged in the task of moral deliberation (Gerrish, 2002). This posture suggests that even Calvinists under the strictest exclusionist rules should still be allowed at the bioethics table.

Thus, moral deliberation may rightly involve compromise, grappling with uncertainty, and civilly articulating differences. Common grace, already-but-not-yet informed compromise, and serious wrestling *are* derivative behaviors of Calvinist "comprehensive doctrines." If invited or allowed at the bioethics table, Calvinists and Reformed Christians will assert that human depravity matters, that spheres of power are limited but God given, and that sacred and secular cannot so easily be separated, but neither should spheres be forced together in a triumphalist theocracy. Rather, fallen humanity's final destiny rests with the perfect purposes and timing of an all-sovereign God.

Their willingness to grapple and struggle with difficult moral questions runs contrary to stereotypes in academic bioethics about religious types, many of which are implied in Jonsen's analysis. Calvinists are not just agreeable nice guys willing to "grapple." They have distinctive views of human nature and of a sovereign God that can be humbly brought to bear in a challenging, pluralistic bioethics landscape for the twenty-first century. Once at the bioethics table, they might rightly argue against a bioethics of exclusion. Calvinists are moral realists, but that realism includes judgment *and* struggle precisely because of the fallen-ness of human agents and the eschatological moment that Calvinists claim we now occupy.

The twentieth-century Dutch Calvinist poet Sietze Buning illustrates the need for strong principle, humble tone, and openness to struggle in his poem, *Obedience* (Buning, 1978). He is recounting as an adult a childhood experience of a particular Sunday in which his family left an oat harvest in the field before a thunderstorm because it was the Sabbath. The storms devastated their crops while they sat idly by in Sunday services. At the time a young teenager, Buning stewed angrily over his parents' decision to let the harvest succumb. In the poem, written decades later, he reflects on the meaning of that event for him as an adult in the early 1970s trying to live obediently in an inner-city home while passing along a sensibility of faithfulness to his boys in a racially divided context:

Fathers often fail to pass on to sons
Their harvest customs
For harvesting grain or real estate or anything.
No matter, so long as fathers pass on to sons
Another more important pattern
Defined as absolutely as muddlers like us can manage:
Obedience (Buning, 1978, 53).

Calvinist and Reformed Christians, like many others from confessional Christian traditions, endorse the necessity of wrestling with or even *muddling through* difficult questions in the here and now. Calvinism in particular offers a theological vocabulary within its "comprehensive doctrines" for messiness and muddling through complex bioethics cases but with a distinctive worldview.

This mentality of Calvinism influences the content, tone, and objectives of moral deliberation in the present. A bioethics informed by a full-orbed view of Calvinism will speak with both confidence of content and, simultaneously, humility in tone to matters of relevance in our time. That confidence does not arise from being absolutely certain about how to apply fixed rules of morality, but instead affirms that, despite one's own limitations, there is One whose timing is perfect and whose purposes may take some time—a long time, perhaps—to work themselves out in our world. The current fallen state of the world and humanity means all is "not the way it's supposed to be," to quote another Calvinist theologian (Plantinga, 1995). Christians, therefore, cannot just legislate the Kingdom into its final fruition. They can, however, persist and argue *generously* in spheres such as bioethics because, like all confessing Christians, they affirm that now they "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) and can admit that they might be wrong. The truth exists, but a Christian who affirms these beliefs must admit all of humanity's fallen, creaturely state in discerning and applying moral beliefs to particular situations. These are postures of the heart and the mind that arguably could shift the tone and tools of moral deliberation in a polarized sphere of bioethics discourse in the twenty-first

century. These are dispositions that could be heeded by Christians and non-Christians alike.

With this broad-angle view of Calvinism, we have endeavored to convey how this one robust confessional Christian theological tradition could constructively inform the messiness of the challenging ethical questions in twenty-first-century bioethics defined at least as absolutely as muddlers like *all* of us can manage.

NOTES

1. The ironies here are profound because many of the founding voices in the field of bioethics came from strong religious and theological backgrounds. But as bioethics professionalized, it also ended up marginalizing the methods of theological discourse.

2. We acknowledge that the concept of "tradition" and what constitutes one is itself contested. MacIntyre has said part of knowing that something is a tradition includes when adherents argue about what counts as part of the tradition. On these grounds alone, the centuries-long discussion of Calvinism and Reformed theology lead us to conclude that, by MacIntyre's standards at least, Calvinism is a tradition.

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