

Of Idols and Images Calvin and Luther on Religious Art

*Elisabeth Sommer**

The vast majority of artworks produced up to and during the Sixteenth Century were destined for the Church. The visual expression of piety formed an accepted part of devotional life for both the artist and the patron or donor. In the light of this, the attitude of the Reformers to religious art takes on considerable significance. Carlstadt led the way in the active destruction of many religious paintings and sculptures. Luther, in horror at this wanton destruction, spoke out in favor of retaining religious art, but wished its primary function to be that of a teaching tool rather than an exercise in piety. Calvin possessed what probably stands as the most complex view on religious art. It is with his system of thought that this paper is primarily concerned, while Luther's attitude will be investigated in relation to that of Calvin. The way in which both men handled the matter of images reveals much about what set them apart in their theological concerns.

John Calvin was no hater of art. He was too much imbued with a respect for the humanities ever to condemn their visual expression without qualification. An investigation of his works establishes this. In the *Institutes*, *The Geneva Catechism*, and in his treatise on relics, Calvin denies that all images should be banned. A passage from the *Institutes* expresses his opinion on the matter. He says, ". . . I am not so scrupulous as to think that no images ought ever to be permitted", which he follows with a description of sculpture and painting as "the gifts of

**Elisabeth Sommer received her BA degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1980 and her Masters degree in History from the University of Virginia in 1985. She has been a teaching assistant for the English history survey courses and is continuing her study of Early Modern Europe.*

God".¹ Due to the fact that the visual arts *do* originate from God, Calvin requires "the pure and legitimate use of both..."² Clearly then, some species of images do come under fire. In attempting to determine which images are the wrong ones, we must consider Calvin's basic ideas on the subject. From the base provided by an investigation of these ideas, we can then consider Calvin's practical guidelines as well as how and why he differed from Luther.

In order to appreciate Calvin's ideas on images fully, some acquaintance with his understanding of man (hereafter referred to as his anthropology) is necessary. Certain points hold particular importance for his theology of images. Basically, Calvin feels that a great gulf exists between God and man. Since the Fall, man has essentially lived in spiritual exile. Although he may know "inferior things", he is bereft of the knowledge of Divine things. Man's condition is most horrible. Indeed, the Fall "has perverted the whole order of nature . . ." but especially that of man.³ Despite this fact, man's corrupt nature is filled with an "immoderate self-love."⁴ Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin envisions fallen man as constantly blinded by selfishness. He may seek God but without God's grace his way remains dark. The path must be cleared, however, so that righteousness may be fostered in those to whom God elects to grant His grace. Always, God's will must be sought and served. This is the world view with which Calvin approaches images.

Calvin first mentions images in connection with his discussion of man's "natural instinct" to worship a Deity. The fact that man is willing to exalt a natural object above himself by making it a god, provides firm proof for Calvin of the strength of man's instinctual belief in God.⁵ This tendency to create a god from a natural object is "natural to man" who has a "strong propensity" to such idolatry.⁶ God, however, forbids worship through images. Calvin continually refers to such worship as hateful to God and contrary to His commandments. Thus a tension appears which permeates the whole of Calvin's thought on images. Man desires to use images in worship. God rejects this.

For Calvin, the reasons for God's rejection of images directly relate to the nature of His being, as well as to the honor due Him in worship. The primary difficulty with images lies in the fact that they are false. "Whenever any image is made as a representation of God, the Divine glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood."⁷ Calvin draws a sharp contrast between God and man which illuminates why images can have nothing to do with true divinity. He writes that

1. Jean Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Allen trans., (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1850) vol.1, p.108.

2. *Loc. Cit.*

3. *Ibid.* p.225.

4. *Ibid.* p.222.

5. *Ibid.* p.52.

6. *Ibid.* p.100-101.

7. *Ibid.* p.98.

"God alone is sufficient witness to himself [but] the whole world has been seized with such brutal stupidity, as to be desirous of visual representations of the Deity and thus to fabricate gods of wood, stone, gold, silver and other inanimate and corruptible material..."⁸

This passage contains several implications which are basic to Calvin's notion of the falseness of images. A natural object cannot represent the Divine. Nature is subject to decay and thus opposed to the eternal nature of God, Calvin emphasizes the contrast between nature and God when he maintains that "the Divine Majesty is dishonoured by a mean and absurd fiction, when he that is incorporeal is likened to corporeal form; he that is invisible to a visible image; he that is spirit to inanimate matter; and he that fills immensity to a log of wood, a small stone, or a lump of gold."⁹ A general neo-Platonism seems to underlie this view. Calvin expresses scornful horror at the thought that God can in any way be likened to anything material. Attempting to embody the supernatural "is manifestly repugnant to the order of nature" although it is natural to fallen man.¹⁰ Such a distance exists between the falsity of images and the reality of God that man is forbidden "not only to worship images, but to regard them as the residence of his divinity"¹¹. — God's nature brooks no physical image.

The aforementioned passage also implies that the false nature of images results from the fact that man fabricates them himself. Calvin states this more directly when he declares that false gods all "proceed from the mind of man".¹² One of the ways in which idolatry originates is when people begin to seek things in which to place their faith among "the figments of men".¹³ Nothing having its origin in fallen man can provide a true representation of God. These images remain mere "figments". As Calvin views it, God makes this painfully clear in the Scripture, where in "idols are frequently stigmatized as being the works of men's hands, unsanctioned by Divine authority: in order to establish this principle, that all modes of worship which are merely of human invention, are detestable".¹⁴ For this reason, idolaters "which serve God with their imagination, like the Papists, dishonour and blaspheme instead of serving".¹⁵

Calvin holds that God's true nature can be derived from Scripture. He ties this fact to his ideas on images most clearly in his *Sermons on The Second Book of*

8. *Ibid.* p.96.

9. *Ibid.* p.98.

10. *Ibid.* p.101.

11. Jean Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, Henry Beveridge trans., vol.I, (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1958), p.131.

12. *Institutes*, p.65.

13. Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four books of Moses*, Thomas Myers trans., vol.I, (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Soc., 1850), p.451.

14. *Institutes*, p.98.

15. Jean Calvin, *Sermons sur le Livre de Michée*, Supplementa Calviniana vol.V, Erwin Mulhaupt ed., (Neukirchner Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1961), p.135.

Samuel. In the course of this work, he points out that the Ark of the Covenant did not contain an idol but rather the law. "By this we see that God is not shown but in his word." Since we have *this* image "it is not at all necessary for us to make idols . . . but it is necessary that we understand it (the image) in his word . . ." ¹⁶

Images also confine God. Calvin indicates this when he includes comparing "he that fills immensity to a log of wood . . ." in his list of the absurdities of idolatry. This particular absurdity shares a similarity with that of comparing God to *any* natural object. Just as God's "Otherness" separates his nature from that of created things, so too does this "Otherness" turn any attempt to confine Him into a ridiculous venture. Calvin quotes the observation of Ambrose that some may worship an idol thinking it an image of God, "whereas the invisible image of God is not in that which is seen, but specifically in that which is not seen". ¹⁷ The Reformer does admit that Scripture records certain appearances of God in the Old Testament, but maintains that these always "afforded a clear imitation of his *incomprehensible* essence". ¹⁸ The clouds, smoke, and fire, which Calvin specifies in relation to this passage, are all impossible to confine in any set form. God extends far beyond any boundaries. Calvin seems to have difficulty reconciling this point with his view of Scripture when he attacks the anthropomorphites in his defense of the Trinity. In this instance, those who "imagine God to be corporeal" due to Scriptural references to His "mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet" fail to realize God's graciousness in using such language as a concession to our weakness. ¹⁹ Since this theme is not uncommon in Calvin's work, we may well question why God should object to His portrayal with human attributes in images if He allows it in Scripture. The answer seem to lie in agency. Images represent *man's* attempt to bring God to a lower level, while Scriptural language results from *God's* willingness to humble His majesty to accommodate man.

This problem of agency is another reason why Calvin feels that the confining of God in images proves unacceptable. He states this in his usual firm manner when he says that God "rejects without a single exception; all statues, pictures and other figures, in which idolators imagined [sic] that he would be near them." ²⁰ If it stood alone, this statement might remain simply another declaration of God's rejection of images in worship. In his sermons and commentaries, however, Calvin elaborates on images as expressive of man's efforts to bring God to him. In a passage referring to the origin of idolatry, he observes that "men supposed that they could not otherwise possess God than by subjecting Him to their own imagination. Nothing, however, could be more preposterous; for since the minds

16. Jean Calvin, *Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis*, Supplementa Calviniana vol.I, Erwin Mülhaupt ed., (Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1961), p.135.

17. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.I, p.149.

18. *Institutes*, p.65.

19. *Ibid.* p.116.

20. *Loc. Cit.*

of men and all their sense sink far below the loftiness of God, when they try to bring Him down to the measure of their own weak capacity, they travesty Him."²¹ This passage provides an excellent example of how Calvin's thought on images fits together. Man wishes to subject God to the notions formed in man's imagination, but God's Otherness raises Him beyond His fallen creature, thus making the mere attempt to confine Him a gross violation of His honor.

Calvin explains the full measure of man's audacity in his sermons on Second Samuel. He first states simply that men "wanted to have images to invoke God . . ." Then he reveals that many fall into idolatry because ". . . it seems to them that God is removed from them if they do not see him. And, on the contrary, when they have idols, it seems that they hold God in their hand and that he will be favorable to them."²² In this instance, Calvin sees man as not only wanting to confine God, but in some measure to control Him. God defines his "legitimate worship" in His law, but man continually seeks the forbidden means of worship.²³

In investigating the question of why man is naturally inclined to idolatry, we encounter Calvin's anthropology, which is central to his answer. The neo-Platonic tendencies which certainly tinge his ideas on why images are repugnant to God burst into full color in his ideas on why images are a danger to man. Four aspects of man drive him to idols. These consist of his weakness, vanity, sensuality, and self-deception. Despite the fact that Calvin speaks of "the propensity" of man's *mind* to idolatry, all four aspects can be tied to problems based on the body. In expounding on the first three, Calvin specifically links the sin of idolatry to a sin of the eyes. This may echo his view that man's inability to see evidence of God's nature in creation is a failure of vision. Man's self-deception is also linked to faulty eyesight, but less directly. Throughout his treatment of man's relation to images, Calvin denies any difference between Old Testament idolatry and the idolatry of his day. This follows naturally as a result of the primary role which anthropology plays in his thinking. Man's basic nature is not subject to history.

Calvin depicts man's dependence on visual images as a weakness of faith. This theme runs through much of his treatment of idolatry. Man's restless quest for idols began because: "Not content with a *spiritual* knowledge of God, they thought they should receive more clear and familiar impressions of him by means of images."²⁴ Although as pointed out earlier, Calvin often refers to God's condescending to give us a more "familiar impression of him," the problem with this particular means lies in its consequences (aside from the immediate problem of agency). When the Israelites made the golden calf, ". . . they denied not that God was their redeemer . . . but they wished to see him in the calf, because they did not feel assured of his actual presence when they did not see him with the

21. *Commentaries on Moses*, vol.III, p.330.

22. *Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis*, p.439.

23. *Institutes*, pp.112-112.

24. *Ibid.* p.106.

bodily eye."²⁵ Here, Calvin relates an action for which God exacted a terrible vengeance, to man's need for a physical reinforcement of his faith. In the light of this type of association, Calvin's application of this principle to Catholic practices takes on added force. He claims that, like the idolaters of the Old Testament, the Papists use the crosses, relics, and other visual trapping, because "they do not know how God can be present or near them if not by visible signs . . ."²⁶ Calvin also points out that Papists do not adhere to Scripture but instead "they look at their idols when they pray."²⁷ A similar statement that "they *flee* to them [images] when they are desirous to pray," reinforces Calvin's association of images and a weak faith.²⁸

Calvin also views images as expressive of man's vanity. It is this aspect, and that of sensuality, which most affect Calvin's feelings about religious art. Whereas many visual trappings can indicate a weakness of faith, vanity and sensuality feed off the portrayal of the human figure. Vanity is further connected to images because they are man's creations. The vanity of idolatry shares the spiritual blindness common to all aspects of idolatry. Calvin states that the Israelites had many signs of God's presence. "Yet accounting as nothing all these . . . they [desired] to have a figure which [might] satisfy their vanity."²⁹ In the *Institutes*, Calvin reveals why he thinks that man's vanity is satisfied in an image. In Chapter XI, he says, "Daily experience teaches that the flesh is never satisfied, till it has obtained some image, *resembling itself*, in which it may be foolishly gratified as an image of God."³⁰ Calvin's commentary on the "statues" referred to in the Old Testament as being placed near the altar, again shows this association of wrong images with those bearing man's physical appearance. After citing the passage, he explains, "What Moses . . . calls by this name, were *not* images bearing *the shape of a man*, but heaps of stones . . ."³¹

One of the most prevalent themes in Calvin's writings on images is that they stir our sensuality. Ironically, the Catholic *Articles of Faith* use this very argument in *favor* of them. The fifth proof cited of the necessity for genuflection before images ". . . is from the experience of our own senses. For, in praying before an image, we are more inflamed to devotion, our zeal being excited by its very aspect."³² As far as Calvin is concerned, this is a most unfortunate argument to make. His reply, throughout which he quotes Augustine, reveals a great deal about why he feels that images are a particular danger in worship. He writes, "And what Augustine says is certainly true, that no one prays or worships

25. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.III, p.392.

26. *Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis*, p.127.

27. Jean Calvin, *Sermons sur les Livres de Jeremie et des Lamentations*, Supplementa Calviniana vol.VI, Erwin Mulhaupt ed., (Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1971), p.91.

28. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.I, p.149.

29. *Commentaries on Moses*, vol.III, p.330.

30. *Institutes*, p.105.

31. *Commentaries on Moses*, vol.III, p.318.

32. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.I, p.97.

beholding an image without thinking that he is heard by it." This happens because ". . . the mind, *living in a body*, thinks that the body, which it sees very like its own, has sensation. Hence, when they (images) are placed on an eminence to be seen by those who pray to them, though they want life and sense, yet by their resemblance to living members and senses, they affect weak minds, so as to seem to live and breathe."³³ This may explain the "propensity of man's *mind*" to idolatry, since the mind appears subject to the body.

The sensual pull of images emerges more explicitly in Calvin's observation that idols "may very well derive their name from heat, because their superstitious worshippers inflame themselves with love"³⁴ Referring in the same commentary to paintings on the walls of the Temple, he says, "the Jews were inflamed with such desires that they left no space empty, because they wished their eyes to fall upon these figures, which more and more inflamed their superstition."³⁵ The implication that sight is the sense most open to sin through images, plainly surfaces here. So prone are the eyes to wander, that even the word of God does not hold them in check. Calvin complains bitterly of this. God, he says, "hath commanded one common doctrine to be there proposed to all, in the preaching of his word, and in his sacred mysteries, to which they betray great inattention of mind, who are carried about by their eyes to the contemplation of idols."³⁶

Man finds the appearance of images so pleasing that he cannot give them up. In order to justify their use, as well as because of their powerful influence over him, he deceives himself in two ways. First, despite Augustine's statement that all who regard an image in worship think that it hears them, man denies that he really worships the image. Calvin quotes a description by Augustine of the manner in which men deceive themselves. "But they, whose religion was more refined, said, that they worshipped neither the image, nor the spirit represented by it; but that in the corporal figure they beheld a sign of that which they ought to worship."³⁷ It is interesting to note that this argument very closely approaches that of Luther. Given the whole of Calvin's opinion on images, we may imagine that he would not have considered this apology in the least valid. He says that such notions are common among idolators. Their deception simply enables them to slip into imagining power to be attached to the images. They continue to contemplate images and their senses work in the manner described by Augustine. Idolators further deceive themselves by believing that service such as showing reverence to images, pleases God. Calvin again draws a connection with the eyes when he says that "idolators who think to serve God in all they do, see with a foolish devoutness, which blinds them, and the devil makes them think that

33. *Ibid.* p.98.

34. Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Ezekiel*, vol.I, Charles William Bingham trans. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Soc., 1852), p.222.

35. *Ibid.* p.288.

36. *Institutes*, p.103.

37. *Ibid.* p.106.

all this will be found good by God."³⁸

In all of Calvin's thought, the use of images in worship presents a definite danger to man. This outlook coupled with his strong sense that they injure the honor of God, forms the basis for his practical guidelines regarding images. Three things emerge clearly from an investigation of Calvin's works. No image is to be made of God, regardless of whether or not it is specifically intended for use in a church. Despite the opinion of historians Emile Doumergue and Karl Plank, Calvin would undoubtedly have rejected the art of Rembrandt because it depicted Christ, whose image must be included in Calvin's prohibition of that of God.³⁹ Furthermore, no images may be put in churches, regardless of their subject matter. One may, however, argue that Calvin leaves open the question of whether religious art, omitting the depiction of God and Christ, may find a place in private homes and secular buildings. Calvin does specify images in churches as being evil. Finally, Calvin feels that although such images must be despised, the authorities hold the sole responsibility for their removal.

Calvin declares that ". . . to represent God by any figure, before which he is worshiped, is nothing less than to corrupt his glory and so to metamorphose him."⁴⁰ This might seem to leave the way open to those figures before which He would not be worshiped. Of course, this possibility becomes very slight given the whole of Calvin's opinion on images. The Reformer, however, removes all doubt on the issue when he states that *all* likenesses of God are "insulting to the Divine Majesty".⁴¹ This fact results in his conclusion that "nothing should be painted and engraved but objects visible to our eyes: The Divine Majesty . . . ought not to be corrupted by unseemly figures."⁴² A comment from Calvin's *Sermons on the Books of Jeremiaiah and Lamentations*, illustrates the strength of Calvin's aversion to images of God. "It is as if one threw mud in a man's face, when one makes an image of God visible this is what is done."⁴³ Even more forcefully Calvin maintains, "Yet again it is not enough that God be in no way depicted by statues or by painting." but this declaration should be made openly.⁴⁴ God is not to be familiarized by feeble man.

Calvin does often refer to Christ as the image of God by which we may know Him. Since Christ became incarnate in human form, the question arises as to whether the depiction of his human image is included in the prohibition against depicting God. David J.C. Cooper aptly points out, however, that "Calvin's view

38. *Sermons sur le Livre de Michée*, p.205.

39. see Emile Doumergue, "La Peinture dans l'Oeuvre de Calvin", in *L'Art et le Sentiment dans l'Oeuvre de Calvin*, 1902, pp.36-50, and, Karl Plank, "Of Unity and Distinction" in *The Calvin Theological Journal*, vol.13, (1978), pp.16-37. Both men argue that Rembrandt embodied the true spirit of Calvinist art.

40. *Commentaries on Moses*, vol.II, p.388.

41. *Institutes*, p.101.

42. *Ibid.* p.102.

43. *Sermons sur les Livres de Jeremie et de Lamentations*, p.91.

44. *Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis*, p.135.

of Christ as the image is subtly subsumed within a larger understanding of him as the uncreated Logos. He goes beyond the Jesus Christ of human history to Christ the eternal Word of God."⁴⁵ Calvin strongly indicates that the prohibition *does* extend to Christ in his discussion of God's manifestations in the Old Testament. After having cited those that are "incomprehensible" and therefore clearly no excuse for idolatry, he deals with those instances in which God assumed a human aspect. In reference to these, he says, "The appearances of God in human form were preludes to his future manifestation in Christ. *Therefore* the Jews were not permitted to make this a pretext for erecting a symbol of Deity in the figure of a man."⁴⁶ This statement, coupled with Calvin's emphasis on Christ as God in his Trinitarian view, makes it very unlikely that he exempted the depiction of Christ from his prohibition of that of God.

The tension between Christ's as humanity and His divinity goes beyond the issue of images to the heart of Calvin's Christology. Calvin is often accused of emphasizing Christ's divinity to the point of denying Him full humanity. Edward D. Willis, however, defends Calvin against this accusation. He views Calvin's Christology as being designed to affirm the *unity* of the divine and the human in the person of Christ while refuting any notion of Christ as being restricted to the flesh. Willis points to Calvin's use of the phrase *Deus manifestus in carne* as the best expression of this unity.⁴⁷ God is manifest in man's nature in contrast to the angels who merely assume man's form.⁴⁸ From this point of view, Calvin's Christology joins with his ideas on the Trinity in identifying Christ with God. His Christology, however, adds another dimension to the understanding of Calvin's ideas on images. What enables Christ to be the ultimate mediator between God and man is that He is both truly man and truly God. An image can only portray the human aspect and is a human vision of that aspect. Therefore, in an image Christ would be confined to the flesh indeed. This Calvin cannot accept.

At the end of Calvin's quotation of Augustine on the sensual effect of images, Calvin explains one result of this effect. "For this reason," he says, "it was formerly decreed, that there should be no painting in churches and that nothing which is worshiped or adored should be depicted on walls."⁴⁹ In a lengthy passage in his *Commentaries on the Book of Ezekiel*, however, Calvin gives another reason why images do not belong in churches. This passage provides the only instance in which idolatry is not seen as the direct result of anthropology. Speaking of Ezekiel's vision of the painted chamber within the Temple, Calvin makes the following observation:

45. Rev. David J.C. Cooper, "The Theology of Image in Eastern Orthodoxy and John Calvin", in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol.35, (1984), p.229.

46. *Institutes*, p.99.

47. Edward D. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill Co., 1966), pp.62-3.

48. *Ibid.* p.79.

49. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.I, p.98.

It is indeed certain, that the use of painting was always plentiful, but God wished his temples to be pure from images, lest men, . . . should turn aside directly to superstition. For if we see a man or an animal painted in a profane place, a religious feeling does not creep into our minds . . . : Nay idols themselves as long as they are in shops or workshops, are not worshiped. If a painter's shop is full of pictures, all pass them by, and if they are delighted with the view of them they do not show any sign of reverence to the paintings. But as soon as the picture is carried to another place its sacredness blinds men and so stupifies them that they do not remember that they had already seen the same painting in a profane shop. This therefore, is the reason why God did not admit pictures into his temple, and surely when the place is consecrated, it must happen that the painting will astonish men just as if some secret divinity belonged to it.⁵⁰

In this context, the painting takes effect only when set by itself, or especially, in a church. Such a view appears to mitigate the power of anthropology to some degree, and opens the door to the speculation that as long as religious pictures are kept in a secular setting they pose no danger. That is, of course, granting that the paintings had never been used as aids for worship. This restriction, necessary because of the strength of superstitious habits, would mean that the paintings would have to be newly produced. Furthermore, it would prohibit the depiction of figures such as the Virgin, the veneration of whom possessed a particularly strong tradition. Since this would also apply to many saints, an artist in Geneva would have been well advised to save himself a great deal of trouble and simply avoid religious subjects altogether.

At times, Calvin appears extremely iconoclastic. Referring to the Jews, he says that God “. . . taught them to abominate everything that had once borne the name of Idol, that thus they might the more zealously shun the impure superstition of the Gentiles.”⁵¹ He applies this same heat to the contemporary situation. “The Lord exclaims,” he says, “that he burns with jealousy when any idol is erected . . . It is no common zeal of the house of God which ought to penetrate . . . the hearts of believers.”⁵² In his *Sermons on the Second Book of Samuel*, Calvin says that “we ought to note that it is not only necessary that we mock idolatries (a task which he fulfilled to great effect in his *Inventory of Relics*) but that we should have such a detestation for them, that we cannot bear them”.⁵³ In each case, a strong sense of the honor of God sparks the intense loathing of idols (or at least, such a feeling *should* be present). This language also sounds very like that of Carlstadt, and Calvin *might* have approved his actions were it not for the latter's firm reverence for the magistrate's office. Indeed, he follows the tirade against idolatry with a statement that delineates the domain of the magistrate. He says, “It is true, that it is not for us to purge the land of idols, that should come

50. *Commentaries on Ezekiel*, pp.286-287.

51. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.III, p.371.

52. *Ibid.* vol.I, p.189.

53. *Predigten über das 2 Buch Samuelis*, p.128.

from the authorities.”⁵⁴

In Calvin's mind, the word of God as read and preached needs no visual images. It stands sufficient unto itself, and indeed, if man were rightly ordered, should remove any desire for images. The fact remains that man is not rightly ordered and thus images must be removed if the word is to be efficacious.

In a letter written to his associate William Farel in 1539, Calvin refers to “Bucer's defense of Luther's ceremonies”. He explains that Bucer “abhors” images “. . . only he cannot endure that, on account of these trifling observances, we should be separated from Luther. Neither, certainly, do I consider them to be just causes of dissent.”⁵⁵ That Calvin should take this stand says much for his respect for Luther, since the elder Reformer's view on images is radically different from that of Calvin. Each man looks at images through glass colored by his main theological grounding. Calvin's primary concern, as evidenced by his language when speaking of images, lies with the honor due God, and the ill-directed response of fallen man to Him. For Luther, on the other hand, justification by faith, and the power of the word, mold his convictions regarding images. This difference in emphasis affects their approach to Scripture, as well as reflecting their view of man and God. Ironically, Calvin, through basing his ideas on the flawed inner nature of man, ends with a position that Luther considers to be legalistically concerned with externals. Luther wants to guide men to sole dependence on Christ. This is achieved through the Word. In this context, Luther appears to grant more power to the Word than does Calvin. Finally, we must not forget that Luther's writings which most favor images were written in 1525 and shortly thereafter. Calvin could afford to fulminate against images. Luther felt that *he* could not.

Luther at times sounds a great deal like Calvin, despite their differences. In a lecture on Deuteronomy he speaks of God as saying, “You need to humble, and despair of yourself, lest you make many gods, and that you may have one god. For nature cannot but commit idolatry.”⁵⁶ He expresses the same sentiment in a comment recorded in his *Table Talk*: “We easily fall into idolatry, for we are inclined thereunto by nature . . .”⁵⁷ Luther also identifies man's mind as the source of this idolatry. He refers negatively to “. . . opinions and speculations about God constructed *out of ourselves*.”⁵⁸ In all of this Calvin would have heartily concurred. Where Luther departs from Calvin is in his definition of idolatry.

54. *Loc. Cit.*

55. *Letters of John Calvin*, Dr. Jules Bonnet trans. and ed., (New York: Lenox Hill reprint, 1972), vol. I, p. 137.

56. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, in *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), vol. 9, p. 68.

57. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, Helmut T. Lehman ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), vol. 54, p. 71.

58. *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, p. 58.

Luther first indicated this difference in a sermon given at Wittenberg in 1522. Here he states that images may be permitted if not used for worship "although because of the abuses they give rise to," he wishes "they were everywhere abolished . . . For whoever places an image in a church imagines that he has performed a service to God and done a good work, which is downright idolatry."⁵⁹ He proceeds to say that this "greatest and highest reason" to reject idols, has been ignored in favor of a lesser one. "For I suppose there is nobody, or certainly very few, who do not understand that yonder crucifix is not my God . . . but this is simply a sign."⁶⁰ What Calvin describes as a notion common to all idolators, Luther holds himself. He repeats these ideas in his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, issued in 1525. Regarding images he says, "I would prefer not to have them set up in places of worship. I make this judgement not only because I see that they are worshiped — which I think happens rather seldom — but because trust in a work is expressed in their price and beauty."⁶¹ Any hint of Calvin's anthropological approach to images is notably absent. Lacking Calvin's humanist orientation, Luther cocks a sceptical eye at man's reason, not his senses. For him, idolatry stems not from the eyes but from the mind, which imagines that it pleases God through actions determined by man.

The effort to defend this viewpoint forces Luther into some rather extensive scriptural exegesis. Conversely, his lack of a negative anthropological orientation enables him to deal with Scripture as he does. In referring to the prohibition against images, Luther insists that "according to the law of Moses no other images are forbidden, than an image of God which one worships. A crucifix . . . or any other holy image is not forbidden."⁶² Aside from the fact that, unlike Calvin, Luther does not include Christ in the prohibition against images of God, he considerably narrows the scope of the commandment by specifying that it prohibits only those images "which one worships". This distinction would have had no validity for Calvin since, for the most part, he feels that man inevitably worships religious images. After confining the commandment in this manner, Luther removes its authority altogether. He maintains that it "is specifically given to the Jewish people alone" and only in the time of the Old Testament.⁶³ This statement in and of itself directly conflicts with Calvin, who points out that Paul forbade images to the Gentiles.⁶⁴ Even had he not had direct resort to Scripture, Calvin could not historicize the Old Testament declaration against images and still retain his own argument. Since Luther's views are not tied to a negative anthropology, he is free to declare that a new dispensation arises from the New Testament. As he puts it, "I would release and free consciences and the souls from sin . . . while Carlstadt seeks to capture

59. Martin Luther, *Sermons*, LW, Helmut T. Lehman ed., vol.51, p.84.

60. *Loc. Cit.*

61. *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, p.82.

62. Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW, Helmut T. Lehman ed., vol.40, p.85.

63. *Ibid.* p.97.

64. *Institutes*, p. 98.

them with laws and burden them with sin.”⁶⁵

The way in which Luther frees men reveals another interesting difference between Calvin and himself. In differentiating between Old Testament law and New Testament freedom, Luther says that the laws of the Second Table “. . . are not Mosaic laws only, but also the natural law written in each man’s heart, as Saint Paul teaches. Where then, the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, the law remains. Therefore Moses’ legislation about images and the sabbath and what else goes beyond the natural law . . . is free, null and void.”⁶⁶ Luther is so concerned to avoid the legalism and violence set loose by Carlstadt, that he appears to abrogate all the law which deals with the honor due to God. Seen from Calvin’s view, Luther’s fear of social anarchy arising from the iconoclasts leads him to open the way to spiritual anarchy. Significantly, Calvin includes the right worship of God in his definition of the moral law.⁶⁷

Luther’s stand on the prohibition of images shapes all of his commentary on idolatry. While some of Calvin’s most vehement attacks on images occur in his commentaries on the Old Testament, Luther concentrates on idolatry of the spirit. He identifies this idolatry with works righteousness. Often, he spiritualizes the Old Testament references rather than dealing with them literally. An example of this occurs in his explanation of the “hidden meanings” of Deuteronomy Chapter Seven: “The images are the very teachings of godlessness that come forth from . . . the godless notion that God is worshiped by works without faith.”⁶⁸ Later, speaking of Verse Sixteen, he says, “This is why, soon after speaking about judges, he forbids placing a grove and trees and images near the altar of the Lord, that is, fostering a righteousness and pride in works, which God hates.”⁶⁹

Luther often specifies pride in works as a contemporary version of idolatry. In his *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527 - 1530), he observes that setting up images for worship “was customary in the prophet’s time. We do not have *this* kind of idolatry since the material of the heathen’s idolatry is not the same as ours, yet the use and attitude of both kinds of idolatry is the same. What the heathens then had in their wood, we have in our opinions and righteousness.”⁷⁰ His exegesis of the phrase “Nor my praise to graven images” provides a very telling hint as to the real target at which Luther is aiming. At this point it is not the iconoclasts. Luther says one “must understand the prophet’s reference to graven images. In Isaiah’s time every cult had its own form of outward sculpture. Thus when he speaks of images, we must apply this to the images of ungodliness . . . in our own time. The Augustinians and Franciscans have their own images, their claim,

65. *Heavenly Prophets*, p.91.

66. *Ibid.* p.97.

67. *Institutes*, vol.II, John T. McNeill trans., p.1503.

68. *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, p.88.

69. *Ibid.* p.171.

70. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah*, LW, Jaroslav Pelikan ed., vol.17, pp.22-23.

'If I observe this rule, I shall be saved.'⁷¹ Luther speaks even more strongly when he says that it "is just as ridiculous and even more so, to revere cowls and cords as it is to adore a pagan image."⁷² The question that one *could* adore cowls and cords in the same way that one could adore an image would probably never have entered Calvin's mind. For Luther, however, the honor once paid to a physical image has been replaced by honor paid to rules and regulations.

If Luther neglects the honor of God in his dealings with images, he redeems himself with respect to the power of the Word. Due to the power which he attributes to the word, he is free to advocate that images be used to their full polemical and pedagogical value. Luther indicates that he is well aware of man's sensual powers of imagination but feels that the word, when properly preached, can work in conjunction with them. Since his view of images bears no trace of neo-Platonism, he does not concern himself with whether a physical image can teach the truth about spiritual matters.

Luther associates the presence of idolatry with the absence of the Word. In his preface to the Prophets he says, "His word is to be there and it shall give us light and leading. Without His word it is all idolatry and lies."⁷³ Following from this, one of his strongest arguments against iconoclasm was that the Word, not the sword, should be the iconoclastic force. Luther outlined his own actions in the matter. He says, "I approached the task of destroying images by tearing them out of the heart through God's word and making them worthless and despised . . . For when they are no longer in the heart, they can do no harm when seen by the eyes."⁷⁴ In this view, the Word is capable of purifying the heart so that it will not cling to images. Of course, Luther is not thinking of a desire for images in Calvinist terms. His primary theme emerges once again when he explains why the Word renders images harmless. This happens when "the heart is instructed that one pleases God along through faith, and that in the matter of images nothing that is pleasing to him takes place."⁷⁵

Regardless of the type of image-love involved, the fact remains that in Luther's eyes the Word removes any danger of images being misused. He is far from suspecting images in the way that Calvin does. The Word, in fact, inevitably stirs a visual response. In the course of his argument against Carlstadt he says, "whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart. If it is not a sin to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?"⁷⁶ Luther recognizes the strong sensual appeal of images but does not deplore it. He says plainly that he "cannot condemn

71. *Ibid.* p.70.

72. *Ibid.* p.108.

73. Martin Luther, *Preface to the Prophets*, in *Works of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), vol. VI, p.400.

74. *Heavenly Prophets*, p.84.

75. *Loc. Cit.*

76. *Ibid.* p.100; Luther repeats the argument in *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, p.82.

images of graceful design in a private home." At one point he even describes the decorating of houses with biblical scenes as "a Christian work" (a somewhat unfortunate turn of phrase, given Luther's biases).⁷⁷ Luther makes this latter statement in the context of a discussion on the value of rightly used images. These can produce "beneficial and edifying results", particularly for "children and simple people."⁷⁸ Calvin criticizes the notion that images provide a suitable substitute for books and suggests that the idea that they do originated with a decline in preaching.⁷⁹ Luther never intends images to instruct on their own. As they enlighten the eyes, so the Word must enlighten the ears. The reason he gives for their effectiveness with the common people is that these people "are more apt to retain the divine stories when taught by picture and parable than merely by words or instruction."⁸⁰ He emphasizes the need to "spread God's word" using any means available and he includes biblical pictures as one of those means, but they must instruct in God's *words* as well as his *deeds*.⁸¹

Luther ends his discussion of the pedagogical function of images with the flat statement, "This is the way we teach our common people."⁸² He never indicates that the peasantry is particularly prone to the abuse of images. Instead he argues that visual aids serve to impress the truths of the word more firmly upon them since they are not used to theological disputation. As he came from the peasantry himself, his tone towards them is familiar and gentle, with the notable exception of his thunderings against the rebels of 1525. Calvin, on the other hand, implies that the common folk are indeed vulnerable to idol worship. This attitude emerges in some of his examples of idolatry and in his language in criticizing the abuses of the Papacy. He points out, for example, that "illiterate females and almost all the peasantry" give the same honor to Saints Hugo and Lubin as to Christ.⁸³ When he attacks relics, he claims that they "were devised for the purpose of imposing on ignorant people".⁸⁴ Later, he qualifies these "ignorant people" as the "rude and ignorant" ones on whom the Papists impose the adoration of "common wood" under the guise of the true cross.⁸⁵ The tone in which Calvin speaks of those taken in by Catholic practices is distant and superior. Although he by no means sees idolatry as *confined* to the common and uneducated, he seems to feel that no hope exists that they will reform unless all idols are taken from them. It is just possible that Calvin's stand against visual images gathers some of its strength from his separation from the lower social classes. Assuredly, the

77. *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, p.82; *Heavenly Prophets*, p.99.

78. Martin Luther, *Preface to the Personal Prayer Book*, LW, Helmut T. Lehman ed., vol.43, p.43.

79. *Institutes*, pp.102-103.

80. *Preface to the Personal Prayer Book*, p.43.

81. *Loc. Cit.*

82. *Loc. Cit.*

83. *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.III, p.46.

84. *Ibid.* vol.I, p.297.

85. *Ibid.* vol.I, p.302.

contrast of his ideas with those of Luther, who shows an understanding of the commoner, furnishes material for such speculation.

The opinions of the two Reformers can be summed up by stating that for Calvin, a religious image is an idol, while for Luther, this is rarely the case. Calvin does say that God condescends to use images to explain His work, notably in the sacraments, but this remains *His* will and does not involve using a human figure with its attendant difficulties. This type of image is ordained in that same Word which, Calvin maintains, condemns painted and sculpted images. Clearly, he will allow nothing to sully the honor of a God who is infinitely beyond man's understanding. In his thoughts on images at least, Calvin emerges as a man very wary of the sensual aspect of human nature. Perhaps we learn as much about Luther as about Calvin from their respective positions on idolatry and images. Luther's chief concern rests with the proclamation of the Word, that man might be freed from empty action. Images can play a viable role in this task, if tailored to this purpose. In his view, idols are much more likely to be found in the ideas man creates about God than in the vision that he has of Him. In his theology of images, Luther reveals the distance between himself and his humanist brethren. Ironically, in the course of the Reformation, the Renaissance as embodied in the visual arts and the humanist movement, became a house divided.