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Calvin, the Body, and Sexuality
Chapter One

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Introduction

The Origin of this Research Project

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The present research on Calvin's view of the body and sexuality arose initially out of a study of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where the phrase "the prison house of the body" was first found.¹ My initial reaction was that Calvin was not writing as a Christian, but as a Platonist. Subsequently, many more of these expressions were found throughout Calvin's writings.² Calvin's expression gave rise to the following questions: Was Calvin a Platonist with respect to the body? How did Calvin experience his own bodiliness? How much did sixteenth century culture contribute to his views? How did medical science of his time influence his writings? How did he view bodiliness in the context of marriage? How did he view nakedness? Did he include the body in his theology of the Image of God? Since sexuality is involved in these questions, how did he view sexuality?

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It is easy to select a few quotes from Calvin and say "he was a Platonist" or to select some others and say "he was not a Platonist." The reality is much more complex, as will be seen in the chapters that follow.

¹ *ICR* 1.15.2 "...quam ubi soluta est a carnis ergastulo anima, Deum esse perpetuum eius custodem." (*CO* 2:135).

² See the Appendix for a list of them.

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The Body as Research Topic

An examination of Calvin's views on the body and sexuality is a timely necessity. The body has come into its own in discussions during the last forty years or so. It is no longer something that just houses our much more important soul, no longer something incidental to our existence. In some people's minds it is even more significant than the soul: "Our Bodies Ourselves," is the title of both a book and a website dedicated to women's health and sexuality. Bryan Turner claims that "for some writers on the sociology of the body, in modern society the self *is* the body. [...] These developments represent a definite reversal of the traditional Christian pattern in which the flesh was subordinated in the interests of the soul."³ Roy Porter has stated that both the Classical and the Judaeo-Christian components of our cultural heritage "advanced a fundamentally dualistic vision of man [... and] have elevated the mind or soul and disparaged the body." He continues by arguing that "even writers who have sought to rescue the body from neglect or disrepute have nevertheless commonly perpetuated the old hierarchies."⁴

In contrast to these older concepts, some "New Atheists" like Richard Dawkins claim that we are nothing but the sum total of our DNA. People are "determined by their molecules," they are doing what nature has programmed them to do. Of course, on this basis, nobody is responsible for any actions and no-one can be blamed for any atrocities any more than they can be blamed for being born a boy or a girl. Genocidal tyrants and sociopaths have a "faulty motherboard." In this scenario, personal responsibility is impossible, although Dawkins has

³ "The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and its Perspectives," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 33. Italics in original.

⁴ Roy Porter, "History of the Body," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), 206.

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admitted to responding emotionally to acts of evil and to wanting to blame people.⁵

The number of books and articles with the word “body” in the title is vast. Theories about the body have developed in many disciplines, from anthropology and ethnology⁶ to theology and sociology. The literature on this subject continues to expand exponentially. The recently published *A Cultural History of the Human Body* in six volumes has volume three devoted to the Renaissance era and Early Modern Period (1400-1650). It is richly illustrated and has a bibliography of 714 items. The Introduction by William Bynum states quite revealingly about the chapters in the volume:

They have been written by scholars from a variety of disciplines and specializations, which is entirely appropriate for a volume of cultural history. They all naturally touch on ‘bodies’ (all history that deals with people does, willy-nilly: our bodies are all we have, in the end); but they also all reflect in varying degrees five important developments that mark out the Renaissance as a particular epoch in Western history.⁷

The idea that we “have” a body implies that there is something else that does the “having.” That was and is usually considered to be the soul, or sometimes the mind. The philosophy that considers the body to be all there is of a person is now known as materialistic monism, which teaches that the “mind is just a product of biochemical and electrical changes in the central nervous system, and the personality of an individual is nothing more than the interplay of these biological forces on the one hand with environmental forces on the other.”⁸ However, this philosophy was not common during Calvin’s lifetime. People generally thought of themselves as

⁵ See www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/03/my-recent-interaction-with-richard-dawkins/ accessed 14th March 2011.

⁶ For a review article of several ethnological studies on the body, see Lawrence E. Sullivan, “Body Works: Knowledge of the Body in the Study of Religion” in *History of Religions*, 30 # 1 (Aug. 1990), 86-99.

⁷ *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance*, (New York: Berg, 2010), 2.

⁸ Walter C. Johnson, “Only a Machine, or Also a Living Soul?” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 22 # 4 (December 1970), 139.

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a soul being housed in a body, or a body having a soul. During the Renaissance,

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The human body was understood by scholarly commentators in relation to two entities: God and animals. As God's most perfect creation, many viewed the human body as a unique achievement to be understood in isolation from other living creatures. As anatomists such as André du Laurens would argue, clinical anatomy provided a window into the majesty of divine wisdom.⁹

Calvin likewise saw the human body in this way. He saw it as a unique creation of God and also spoke about humans as compared to the "other animals."¹⁰ He called humans "social animals."¹¹

10 A useful and wide-ranging collection of papers on the body, edited by Sarah Coakley, merits attention.¹² After the Introduction and three chapters on the secular perspectives, there are Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant perspectives. These are followed by eight Eastern religious perspectives (Zoroastrian, Hindu, Theravāda Buddhist, Mahāyāna Buddhist, Taoist, Japanese, Sufi, and Sikh). The preoccupation with the body has not been confined to scientists and scholars. Popular literature abounds with titles related to the body. In 15 our consumerist society, the needs – perceived or real – of the body are the mainstay of capitalism. When we compare the present situation to that of the sixteenth century, when even the body itself was still only poorly understood, we observe a vast difference. In Calvin's day, the theological preoccupation with the body mainly had to do with suffering and death, not the

⁹ Susan Broomhall in *A Cultural History of the Human Body*, 93.

¹⁰ "Concerning other animals, it had been said. . ." *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, tr. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:111. "De reliquis animalibus dictum fuerat: Producat terra omnem animam viventem: nunc luteum et sensu carens fingitur Adae corpus: ne quis sibi ultra modum in carne sua placeat, plusquam enim stupidus est quisquis humilitatem inde non discit." (CO 23"35). See also ICR 1.15.3: "Man is called a 'rational animal.'" "*nec rursus ubi dicitur animal rationale, ideo in corpus ratio vel intelligentia competit.*"(CO 2:137).

¹¹ *Comm. Genesis*, 1:128 and 1:213 ". . .for as man is asocial animal. . .". "Man was formed to be a social animal" "conditum esse hominem ut sit sociale animal." ". . . nam quum sociale animal sit homo. . ." (CO 23:46 and 96).

¹² *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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enhancement and care of the body. However, we ought not to infer from this that sixteenth century people were prone to despise the body.

Christian Responses to the Body

5 Many Christian authors have investigated the significance of the body. That should not surprise us since the Christian faith has at its heart the doctrine that the Word became flesh and dwelt among humanity in a human body. As David Tripp put it, “A doctrine so concerned with God made flesh must be concerned with the body in every sense.”¹³ The New Testament teaches that the bodies of believers are temples of the Holy Spirit. “As God was present in the Temple,
10 so he is now in the temple of our body. That is the result of the incarnation of God. God did not become a stone. God came in our flesh. Spirituality and materiality are not mutually exclusive.”¹⁴ It also follows that we are not our own (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Moreover, the promised resurrection of the body gives our present body added significance. Calvin also recognized this. His commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:53 makes it clear that he believed that our
15 resurrection body will be the same body, but without the corruption that previously marred it.¹⁵ Still, for many years the body was scarcely considered being worthy of theological consideration, except that it had to be disciplined, kept under the control of the will.

¹³ “The Image of the Body in the Protestant Reformation,” in *Religion and the Body*, 133.

¹⁴ So Gerhard M. Martin, “Körperbild und ‘Leib Christi’” in *Evangelische Theologie* 52 # 5 (1992), 410. “Wie Gott im Tempel gegenwärtig war, so jetzt im Tempel unseres Leibes. Das ist die Konsequenz aus der Menschwerdung Gottes. Gott ist nicht Stein geworden. Gott kam in unser Fleisch. Spiritualität und Materialität schließen sich nicht aus.”

¹⁵ *The First Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians*, tr. John W. Fraser (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 344. (CO 49:562-3).

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An overview of early Christian theorizing about the human body and the person was written by Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa.¹⁶ He traces the history of the concept of person and body as revealed by various writers. The philosopher Plotinus was ashamed of his body and he and others had a profound repulsion for the Jewish and Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead.

5 Pagan philosophers also rejected the idea of incarnation. For them, this was a grotesque contradiction in terms: how could God ever seek to incarnate Himself, to enter of His own will a human, corruptible body?¹⁷

Stroumsa discusses Tertullian's *De resurrectione mortuorum* to show that in his mind, "Flesh,
10 then, is ancillary to the soul in the commission of sin. On the other hand, it is usually through the flesh, or at least with its help, that sin is committed."¹⁸ That is actually only partly true. Of the fifteen sins of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19, only four are unambiguously those of the body. Stroumsa continues his argument by stating, "Tertullian must show that in the wake of Irenaeus, the Gnostic interpretation of Paul's harsh words against the flesh is mistaken: the Apostle only
15 seems to condemn the flesh. Actually, he refers to the sins of the flesh."¹⁹ Calvin also makes a distinction between the body and the flesh, the latter referring to the sinful nature that affects both body and soul. Stroumsa makes the point that "no pagan philosopher could have wished or dared express such love for the human body, a love that God was the first to show. *Caro salutis cardo*, the discovery of the person as a unified composite of soul and body in late antiquity, was

¹⁶ Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "'Caro salutis cardo': Shaping the Person in Early Christian Thought" in *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, # 1 (Aug. 1990), 25-50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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indeed a Christian discovery.”²⁰

Among Roman Catholics, writings on the human body have often been called “A Theology of the Body,” or something similar.²¹ Pope John Paul II made his contributions from 1979 to 1984 in a series of talks. These were published in 1997.²² These writings have been well-
5 received and widely discussed, also in Protestant circles. One Protestant has even paraphrased the insights of the Pope in a language more accessible to the general reader.²³ Each of these talks, or reflections as he calls them, deals with an aspect of his theology of the body, in this way building up his vision of the body. Each reflection is related to the whole concept. In some cases he modifies ideas expressed earlier. For example, in the talk of October 1, 1980, speaking of
10 committing adultery in one’s heart, he says: “If he is the husband, he cannot commit it with regard to his own wife.” But in the very next talk he expounds on lust and says that “a man can commit this adultery in the heart also with regard to his own wife, if he treats her only as an object to satisfy instinct.”²⁴ Because these talks were delivered over a period of time, there is considerable repetition in the ideas expressed, making the final book massive. He begins with the
15 creation account, *Original Unity of Man and Woman*: “Right from the beginning, the theology of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ See, for example Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*. Braintree, MA: The Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center, 1985. However, his whole book is a defense of Catholic doctrine which progresses to a climax consisting of praise to Mary. He does not provide a useful discussion on the meaning of the body as such.

²² John Paul II [Karol Wojtyła]. *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997.

²³ Sam Torode, *Body and Gift. Reflections on Creation* (South Wayne, WI: Philokalia, 2003) and *Purity of Heart. Reflections on Love and Lust* (South Wayne, WI: Philokalia, 2004)

²⁴ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 155, 157.

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the body is bound up with the creation of man in the image of God. It becomes, in a way, also the theology of sex, or rather the theology of masculinity and femininity, which has its starting point here in Genesis.”²⁵ The following section, *Blessed Are the Pure of Heart*, deals with Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27-28). These two sections form Part One of the book. Part Two is entitled *Life according to the Spirit* and has subsections on “St Paul’s Teaching on the Human Body,” “The Resurrection of the Body,” “Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom,” “The Sacramentality of Marriage,” and “Reflections on *Humanae Vitae*.”²⁶ The Pope uses 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 in combination with Paul’s teaching on the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:18-25 in order to arrive at an understanding of the virtue of purity. Calvin would have agreed with much in these talks, such as the assertion that our bodies are not our own, because they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, it is not likely that Calvin would ever have said: “Purity is the glory of the human body before God. It is God’s glory in the human body, through which masculinity and femininity are manifested.”²⁷ Calvin was more aware of how far humankind had fallen from original righteousness and was concerned about what was defiled and putrid in the body of even a Christian living a chaste life, and he would ascribe glory to God alone. Whereas Pope Paul VI had based his approach on ‘natural law,’ notably in his rejection of artificial birth control, John Paul II took a ‘personalist’ approach in discussing matters of the body. Calvin was closer to Pope Paul VI in regard to this, as his “opposition to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁶ For a critique of *Humanae Vitae* on the basis of its logic or lack thereof, see Carl Cohen, “Sex, Birth Control, and Human Life,” in *Philosophy & Sex*, ed. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1975), 150-165.

²⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 209.

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celibacy was at bottom a defense of natural law.”²⁸ Calvin sometimes resorts to calling something “unnatural” if he disapproves of it, for example, government by women. And he claims Eve’s obedience as the “natural” condition for women from the beginning. Pope John Paul II has been the most prominent author to discuss the human body in a theological
5 framework. His concern for the value and dignity of human life is highly commendable.

James Keenan also provides an insightful article, quoting a variety of writers, both Catholic and Protestant.²⁹ His practical insights are fourfold: (1) “the retrieval of the human body shows that just as Christians labored to understand the unity of Christ as fully human and fully divine, no less have they attempted to understand themselves as fully one in body and soul and in
10 the body of Christ.” (2) “the human body [. . .] is never an object, but always a person, a subject. If the body were an object, then we could say, with Plato, that our body is something that does not really pertain to us.” (3) “The human body needs its own voice.” (4) “A theology of the body calls us to encounter the Eucharist once again as the living body of Christ.”³⁰ He also points out that “our tradition is extraordinarily physical.”³¹

15 From the Protestant side, there have been no authors who have taken as comprehensive an approach as did John Paul II. Most have limited themselves to articles devoted to a specific aspect. One writer we may mention as having a more comprehensive approach is James B. Nelson, author of *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. This book

²⁸ Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 112.

²⁹ James F. Keenan, S.J., “Christian Perspectives on the Human Body,” *Theological Studies*, 55 (1994), 330-346.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 342, 343, 344.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

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and *The Intimate connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* will be discussed in the chapter on Sexuality.³² For an overview of recent literature on the body, see Caroline Bynum's thoughtful article "Why All the Fuss About the Body?"³³

Of those Christians writing about the body, only a few have done so with reference to Calvin. The first to do so was Margaret Miles, who limited her inquiry to the *Institutes*.³⁴ She sees the organizing principle of Calvin's theology as "the glory of God." She analyzes Calvin's distinctions between soul and spirit, and body and flesh, but is more concerned with "flesh" as the sinful part of humanity. "The body plays no role, for Calvin, either in the corruption of the soul or in its own corruption, but is the helpless victim, along with the soul, of the destructive hegemony of 'flesh.'"³⁵ She concludes, "The effect of Calvin's idea of the passivity of the body and the activity of the soul is to relieve the body of responsibility for the sinful agenda of the 'flesh,' and to demonstrate the permanent integrity of the body in each of the stages of human experience."³⁶ Miles mentions the three stages of the body as "the good creation of God" then the "miserable condition as fallen," and finally "the resurrection of the body." Her attempt to relate everything to the perceived organizing principle of "the glory of God" makes her discussion seem rather forced.

³² James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) and *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

³³ "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective" *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn 1995), 1-33.

³⁴ Margaret R. Miles, "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's 'Institutes of the Christian Religion,'" *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 74 # 3 (July 1981), 303-323.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 314.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

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James Goodloe has made a contribution in a paper, subsequently published as an article,³⁷ in which he takes issue with Miles' assertion that "the glory of God" is the organizing principle of Calvin's theology. His conclusion on the meaning of Calvin's use of "the prison house of the body" is that "it seems to be a common phrase that is not helpful in expressing what Calvin finally says. At best, it is an infelicity. At worst, if taken literally, it indicates inconsistency."³⁸ Goodloe clarifies the issues of body, soul, and flesh with more insight than Miles. Except for one reference to a Job sermon, which he obtained from Bouwsma, Goodloe also restricted his Calvin references to the *Institutes*.

A few authors have written about Calvin's own body. In Volume 3 of Émile Doumergue's *Jean Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, Doumergue relates the illnesses that beset Calvin in quite some detail.³⁹ More recently Charles Cooke wrote "Calvin's Illnesses and Their relation to Christian Vocation." While he does discuss his clinical observations, he says very little about Christian vocation.⁴⁰ John Wilkinson's book *The Medical History of the Reformers* provides detailed information about Luther, Calvin, and Knox.⁴¹ His medical commentary has supported and enlarged my understanding of my own research about Calvin's body.

³⁷ James C. Goodloe IV. "The Body in Calvin's Theology," in *Calvin Studies V*, ed. J.H. Leith, (Davidson, NC: Davidson College, 1990), 103-117. Papers presented at Davidson College, 1986. In endnote 57 he criticizes Miles for inaccuracies of the references.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁹ Émile Doumergue. *Jean Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de son temps*. Vol. 3. (Lausanne: Georges Bridel & C^{ie}, 1905), 512-525.

⁴⁰ Charles L. Cooke, M.D., F.A.C.P. "Calvin's Illnesses and Their Relation to Christian Vocation" in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 59-70.

⁴¹ John Wilkinson, *The Medical History of the Reformers* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press Ltd, 2001).

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While some contemporary issues regarding the body, such as abortion and euthanasia, were not foremost in the minds of sixteenth century people, they did have concerns about the body, especially about the suffering body. As will be seen in the discussions that follow, various authors have opted for believing Calvin to be either a Platonic thinker or just the opposite. This is usually reflected in the emphasis they put on certain of his writings.

This dissertation will explore aspects of Calvin's understanding of the human body in the context of his life and work as a reformer of church and society.