

USE OR INFLUENCE? CALVIN AND THE CAPPADOCIANS
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John Calvin was a man who was extremely well read in the early church fathers. During his lifetime printed editions of nearly all the important texts by the Fathers had become available.¹ A.M. Hunter has noted that “none . . . had studied the Fathers more closely than he or had more thoroughly assimilated their doctrine.”² For evidence of Calvin’s appreciation of the Fathers, one needs only to look to the earliest edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). There Calvin included an introductory *Epistle to King Francis* in which he cites from the Fathers as least eighteen times, in addition to the approximately one hundred citations in the text of the *Institutes*.³ This number only increased in subsequent editions of the *Institutes*.⁴ Hunter elsewhere remarked that Calvin “fully appreciated the worth of their writings upon Scripture and doctrine” seeing them as “moulders, . . . of the theological thought which shaped the creeds accepted by him as the standards for the Christian Church of all time.”⁵

The rise of humanism in the period immediately preceding the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had produced an environment in which the classic works of antiquity

¹Johannes van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996), 685, 698.

²A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1950), 38.

³van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” 671.

⁴J.F. Peter, “The Ministry in the Early Church As Seen by John Calvin,” *EvQ* 35 (1963): 75.

⁵A. Mitchell Hunter, “The Erudition of John Calvin,” *EvQ* 18 (1946): 203.

were being rediscovered. This movement can be summarized by the Latin phrase *ad fontes* (meaning, back to the sources).⁶ This motto of humanist scholarship forms the intellectual background to Calvin's theological and exegetical writings. John Calvin was a man of his times and his legal training in Orléans and Bourges prepared him to use the tools of Renaissance humanism in his future theological and exegetical studies.⁷ Calvin's study of the law "opened his eyes to the world of classical antiquity and to the study of ancient texts."⁸ As the Patristic and Calvin scholar Johannes van Oort has summarized, "There is no doubt that, in keeping with the humanist principle of *ad fontes*, the sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin read widely in the Fathers."⁹

Calvin's knowledge of the Fathers extended to the Greek Fathers as well. Johannes van Oort has remarked that "Calvin nearly always refers to them [the Cappadocian Fathers] when discussing topics which were of importance to Western theology."¹⁰ He cites Basil the most often, Gregory of Nazianzus much less and Gregory of Nyssa not at all.¹¹ Anthony Lane offers as a possible explanation of Calvin's neglect of Gregory of Nyssa the fact that Nyssa was "the most Platonist" of the Cappadocians.¹² To which Van Oort adds: "Evidently the Reformer [Calvin]

⁶Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 45.

⁷For a thorough treatment of the type of humanism which Calvin would have encountered in Orléans, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 51-67 and idem, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 40-66.

⁸Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 171.

⁹van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," 697-98.

¹⁰Ibid., 691.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin - Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 85.

considered him [Gregory of Nyssa] to be too speculative and mystical a theologian.”¹³ His early knowledge of Basil of Caesarea is evidenced by a reference in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto* (1539) in which he refers the Cardinal to a better time in the history of the church, as in the days of “Chrysostom and Basil, among the Greeks, and of Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine, among the Latins.”¹⁴ Also in 1539, in the second edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin quotes affirmatively a certain quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity.¹⁵ The significance of this quotation will be explored later in this paper. For now, suffice it to say that Calvin was, at the very least, cognizant at a very early date of the existence of both Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus.

Did John Calvin merely use the Cappadocian Fathers polemically against his opponents or was his thought also directly influenced by their writings? The consensus among those who have studied the issue is that Calvin primarily *used* the Fathers polemically to support his arguments.¹⁶ The purpose of this paper is to explore the question of whether Calvin may also have been *influenced* by the writings of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus in the development of his thought in two specific areas: namely Basil and his *duplex cognitio*¹⁷ and Gregory and his doctrine of the Trinity. But before addressing these two very interesting

¹³van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” 691.

¹⁴John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*. Vol. 1. Translated by David Constable. Edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnett (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 38.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:13:17. “I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.”

¹⁶See Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 3, 28-30 and van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” 671.

¹⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1:1. The question is: Did Calvin get the idea for the twofold knowledge of God and humanity found in the opening sentence of the *Institutes* from Basil of Caesarea?

questions, the methodology of this paper must first be outlined.

Methodology

In this paper the basic methodology outlined by Anthony Lane in his *John Calvin - Student of the Church Fathers* will be followed.¹⁸ Lane describes his approach as one of *minimalism* or a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”¹⁹ By this phrase Lane means that he will only acknowledge that Calvin used or was influenced by any writer if solid evidence exists.²⁰ Based upon his research, Lane has outlined eleven theses which form the basic presuppositions of his own analysis of Calvin’s use of the Fathers. Since these theses are foundational to the study of Calvin’s use of the Fathers, they are listed below:

Thesis I: *Calvin’s citations of the fathers are not to be confused with modern footnotes and must not be used uncritically to establish sources.*

Thesis II: *Calvin’s use of the fathers (especially in the *Institutio* and in the treatises) is primarily a polemical appeal to the authorities.*

Thesis III: *In his commentaries, by contrast, Calvin is less interested in authorities but instead debates with other interpreters.*

Thesis IV: *In the commentaries a negative comment may be a mark of respect and may serve as a pointer to Calvin’s sources.*

Thesis V: *In seeking to determine which works Calvin actually read, one must take into account factors like the availability of texts and the pressures of time.*

Thesis VI: *A hermeneutic of suspicion is appropriate in determining which works Calvin actually consulted.*

Thesis VII: *Caution must be exercised before claiming that Calvin used any particular intermediate source.*

¹⁸Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 1-13. Chapter 1 of Lane’s work is completely devoted to his own methodology which is outlined in eleven theses.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, xi.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Thesis VIII: *A critical approach is necessary to determine which authors influenced Calvin, even where Calvin cites them extensively.*

Thesis IX: *While Calvin's explicit use of a father does not exhaust his knowledge of that father, it does indicate the kind of knowledge that he had and claims about who influenced Calvin should cohere with this evidence.*

Thesis X: *A critical examination of Calvin's use of the fathers, and especially of his literary citations, can provide points to which works he was reading at a particular time.*

Thesis XI: *A careful and critical reading of the evidence can lead to tentative or firm conclusions about which specific editions Calvin used.*²¹

The importance of Lane's theses will be more clearly seen when seeking to determine which sources were available to Calvin and how those sources were used. Lane's emphasis upon knowledge of the texts which were available to Calvin and at what date those texts were in his possession is one aspect of his methodology which will be followed wholeheartedly in this paper.

Although Lane's basic methodology underlies much of this paper, at times his theses are more cautionary than necessary. Lane himself admits that his approach is a reaction to the work of other less careful scholars who claim that Calvin used or was influenced by particular writers with little or no evidence to support their claims.²² Likewise, Carl Mosser has correctly observed that while Lane's criteria rightly tempers "exaggerated or uncritical claims of influence," they are, nevertheless, "at times unduly restrictive and open to criticism."²³ Again, Lane would seem to concur by stating that "Calvin will certainly have read and have been influenced by more people than the surviving evidence indicates."²⁴ In this paper, Lane's theses are assumed. However, not all of Lane's conclusions will be adopted wholesale. Wherever

²¹Ibid., 1-13.

²²Ibid.

²³Carl Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification," *SJT* 55 (2002): 56, n. 83.

²⁴Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, xi-xii.

disagreements occur, the reasons will be clearly stated. Overall, Lane's caution that one should not make "unwarranted claims based on flimsy or non-existent evidence"²⁵ is fundamental to historical studies of this type.

Sources Available

Before embarking on a study of Calvin's treatment of the Cappadocians one must first ask the twin questions of what sources were available to Calvin and when did he have access to them. Although in Calvin's day most of the important texts of the patristic era had been made available in printed form,²⁶ Calvin himself did not always have access to these works. The libraries of Basel and Strassburg were excellent repositories of resources, but Calvin obviously only had access to these libraries when present in those cities.²⁷ The fact that Calvin had access to some writings by both Basil and Gregory is seen in his reference to their description of early monasticism in Book IV of the *Institutes*.²⁸ Although no quotation is made and no reference is given, Calvin seems clearly to have read the testimony of these "eyewitnesses." The questions remain, however, of which of the writings of the two Cappadocians were available to Calvin and when did he have access to these writings. In this section of the paper, an attempt to outline the sources used by Calvin for both Gregory and Basil will be made based upon the quotations of these Fathers found elsewhere in Calvin's writings.

²⁵Ibid., xii.

²⁶van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," 685, 698.

²⁷Ibid., 5.

²⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:13:8. After describing certain features of the monasticism of the early church in contrast to the monasticism of his own day, Calvin states the following: "These things might seem exaggerated if they were not handed down by experienced eyewitnesses, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, and Chrysostom."

Gregory of Nazianzus

The quotation of Gregory of Nazianzus on the doctrine of the Trinity which is found in the second edition of the *Institutes* does more than merely indicate that Calvin was familiar with “The Theologian” from at least the early date of 1539.²⁹ In addition, this quotation also reveals to the careful observer at least three facts about Calvin’s source for this quotation by Gregory of Nazianzus.

First, in the original Latin edition Calvin quotes the Greek version of this sentence and then provides his own Latin translation.³⁰ This is unusual for Calvin who seems to have a preference for quoting the Greek Fathers from their Latin translations.³¹ The most probable reason for this anomaly is that Calvin did not have access to a Latin translation of Gregory in 1539 even though one done by Willibald Pirckheimer in 1522 had been republished by Erasmus in 1531.³² Therefore, Calvin clearly had to be using a Greek edition which was available prior to 1539, possibly *Orationes Lectissimae XVI* which was published in 1516 or some subsequent edition before 1539.³³

Second, this quote is never updated to reflect a newer edition of Gregory’s works and no new material is ever introduced from Gregory in support of Calvin’s treatment of the Trinity. Therefore, it seems likely that whatever Greek edition of Gregory which Calvin had access to in

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:17. "I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one."

³⁰See footnote 37 of the Battles edition at 1:13:17 of the *Institutes* by John Calvin.

³¹Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 13.

³²Ibid., 84 and Jan den Boeft, “Erasmus and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996), 551, 556.

³³Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 83.

1539 is the only edition which he ever read. All other references to Gregory in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity are quotations of the first half of the same quote introduced in 1539. In 1553 Calvin predictably quotes this line by Gregory in his treatment of the Trinity in his commentary on John 1:1.³⁴ The next year he quotes the exact same line in a writing defending the doctrine of the Trinity against the Spanish heretic Michael Servetus.³⁵ But even at this late date of 1554, he does not introduce any new material from Gregory. The fact that Calvin only quotes again from the first half of the quotation used first in the *Institutes* indicates that his only source for Gregory is the same Greek edition used in preparation for the second edition of his *Institutes*.

The other key reference to Gregory by Calvin is one which is found in Book IV of the 1543 *Institutes* regarding Gregory's appraisal of church councils.³⁶ This reference is mentioned again by Calvin in his commentary on Acts 15:1-5 regarding the first church council at Jerusalem.³⁷ Interestingly, this reference to Gregory is in a somewhat negative context. The significance of this use will be discussed in another section of this paper. For now it should be noted that the source for this reference has to be a 1540 Latin translation of Basil done by Janus Cornarius.³⁸ Prior to 1540, this letter by Gregory (*Epistola* 130) from which this reference comes

³⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle in vol. XVII of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 29.

³⁵Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 83.

³⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:9:11.

³⁷*Ibid.*, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostle*, vol. 2, trans. Christopher Fetherstone in vol. XIX of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 41.

³⁸Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 81-84, 164. The reason that it is known that Calvin used this edition of Basil will be explored in the next section of this paper which describes Calvin's available sources for Basil.

was unavailable. It was published in this collected work of Basil as *Epistola* 102 on page 699 of the Cornarius translation.³⁹ Thus, no other edition of Gregory is needed to explain Calvin's direct references to him.

There are other references to Gregory among Calvin's writings, but no other direct quotations. These references are inconclusive regarding a possible source. For example, Calvin's reference to Gregory as an eyewitness of the early church's monasticism in *Institutes* 4:13:8 is of no help in determining his source. There is no direct quotation to be compared with existing sources. It could easily have been the same Greek text cited by Calvin at 1:13:17. Given the lack of other direct quotations, it seems safe to assume that no new edition of Gregory was read by Calvin. Therefore, the conclusion of this study is that Calvin only used a Greek edition of Gregory of Nazianzus which was published prior to 1539.

Basil of Caesarea

Calvin first refers to Basil in 1539 in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto*.⁴⁰ This reference is significant because it predates the Cornarius translation of 1540. Also in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin quotes briefly from Basil's homilies on the Psalms.⁴¹ Lane has capably demonstrated that after 1540 Calvin clearly used the Latin translation produced by Cornairus. But the fact that Calvin had knowledge of Basil prior to 1540 will be of significance when the question of Basil's influence upon Calvin's concept of the *duplex cognitio* is addressed. In this regard, Ford Lewis Battles has argued that Calvin "clearly" used a 1532 Latin version of Basil

³⁹Ibid., 83-84.

⁴⁰John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*. Vol. 1. Translated by David Constable. Edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnett (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 38.

⁴¹Ibid., *Institutes*, 1:16:8.

published by Erasmus in 1532.⁴² This discussion will be resumed in the section of Basil's possible influence upon Calvin's *duplex cognitio*.

The clearest evidence for which edition of Basil that Calvin used after 1540 is found in his dispute with Pighius recorded in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* that was published in 1543.⁴³ In this work, Calvin responds to Pighius' use of Basil in support of his position on the freedom of the will. Pighius quoted from two works by Basil.⁴⁴ According to Lane, Pighius was using a Latin edition of Basil which was translated by Raphael Maffei Volaterranus between 1515 and 1531.⁴⁵ Calvin's response includes citations from one of the works previously cited by Pighius, as well as two additional writings attributed to Basil.⁴⁶ Since significant differences existed between the Latin translations of Basil which were available in the sixteenth century, the edition from which Calvin quoted can be discerned. It was the aforementioned 1540 translation by Janus Cornarius. Calvin's introduction of additional texts by Basil which had not been brought up previously by Pighius can best be explained as a result of Calvin's personal reading of this new edition of Basil around the same time.⁴⁷

In addition to the above evidence, Calvin referenced Basil three times in the 1543

⁴²Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*. Edited by Robert Bendetto (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 246.

⁴³Ibid., *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. Edited by A.N.S. Lane. Translated by G.I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

⁴⁴Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 164.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 82 and 164.

⁴⁷Ibid.

edition of his *Institutes*.⁴⁸ This is probably another indication that Calvin was reading the 1540 Cornarius edition of Basil in the early 1540s. The smattering of references to Basil during this period are indicators of what Calvin was reading at that particular time.

To summarize, Calvin clearly had access to the 1540 Latin edition of Basil translated by Cornarius very soon after its publication. He used this work in his reply to Pighius and in his preparation of the 1543 edition of the *Institutes*. There is, however, evidence that another edition of Basil was in Calvin's possession prior to 1540. The significance of this hypothesis will be explored in the section of this paper which explores Basil's possible influence upon Calvin.

Clear Polemical Use

The general consensus among the Calvin/Patristic scholars is that Calvin primarily used the Fathers in a polemical way. One such scholar, Johannes van Oort, states very straightforwardly that "Calvin's use of the Fathers was primarily polemical."⁴⁹ This polemical use means that Calvin generally quoted the Fathers in support of his own teaching and against that of his opponents. Anthony Lane has similarly written that "Calvin cites the fathers primarily as witnesses for the defence, as authorities to which to appeal."⁵⁰ Lane compares Calvin's use of the Fathers with his legal background as "witnesses to be called to give evidence for the Reformed cause."⁵¹ Calvin, however, does not merely proof-text the Fathers.⁵² He read the

⁴⁸Ibid., 82.

⁴⁹van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," 698.

⁵⁰Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 3.

⁵¹Ibid., 30.

⁵²Ibid., 29.

Fathers for his own personal benefit, but he also undoubtedly used them in a polemical sense.⁵³

Calvin uses both Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea in a polemical sense together in one sentence in the 1543 edition of the *Institutes*.⁵⁴ There he uses their testimony of the character of monasticism in the early church in contrast to the monasticism which was seen in the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church. In addition to this combined polemical use of the two Cappadocians, Calvin also uses each of them individually as will be seen in the remainder of this section of the paper.

Gregory of Nazianzus

John Calvin clearly uses Gregory of Nazianzus and his statement on the Trinity in a polemical sense when he quotes a now familiar sentence from Gregory's *Oration on Holy Baptism* (40.41).⁵⁵ Calvin's quotation of Gregory is shown below in the immediate context in which it appears in the *Institutes*.

Again, Scripture sets forth a distinction of the Father from the Word, and of the Word from the Spirit. Yet the greatness of the mystery warns us how much reverence and sobriety we ought to use in investigating this. And that passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me:

“I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.” Let us not, then, be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity.⁵⁶

This quotation apparently so “vastly delighted” Calvin that he used the first half of the quote

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:13:8.

⁵⁵Gregory Nazianzen, *Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow in vol. 7 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 375. Subsequent references to this quotation will be cited as *Orat.* 40.41.

⁵⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:17.

three more times: in *Epistle 607* (January 21, 1545); in his comments on John 1:1 in his *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, and in his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity against Servetus.⁵⁷ In defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, Calvin has called Saint Gregory of Nazianzus to the witness stand!

Calvin also uses Gregory in a polemically reverse way in Book IV of the *Institutes* when he cites his negative view of church councils. In this text, Calvin refers to a saying of Gregory which he has read in the 1540 Cornarius Latin edition of Basil. Calvin does not quote Gregory directly, but he gives the sense of his words as that “he never saw a good end to any council.”⁵⁸ The reason Calvin can state this negative statement of Gregory is because it goes against both the Catholic view and his own view of church councils. Calvin uses this statement to make the point that his own view of church councils is not as extreme as that of Saint Gregory’s. Calvin sees value in the great ecumenical councils, but merely refuses to view them as equally authoritative to Scripture. Nevertheless, this reference to Gregory is a polemical reference for he uses it to make his intended point.⁵⁹

Basil of Caesarea

In addition to calling upon Basil (along with Gregory and Chrysostom) as witnesses to the early character of monasticism in the church, Calvin also uses Basil polemically in other contexts. The earliest such use is found in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes* when Basil is used

⁵⁷Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 83.

⁵⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:9:11. This statement by Gregory is also referred to by Calvin in his *Commentary upon the Book of Acts* in the comments on Acts 15:1-5.

⁵⁹Interestingly, Anthony Lane argues that “The disapproving comments should be understood as marks of respect, much as a modern commentator may feel the need to justify departure from the stance of a respected precursor.” Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 4.

as a witness to God's providence and against the pagan notions of chance and fortune.

What then? you will ask. Does nothing happen by chance, nothing by contingency? I reply: Basil the Great has truly said that "fortune" and "chance" are pagan terms, with whose significance the minds of the godly ought not to be occupied. For if every success is God's blessing, and calamity and adversity his curse, no place now remains in human affairs for fortune or chance.⁶⁰

This citation is from Basil's *Homilies on the Psalms* from the section on Psalm 32:4. In addition to its polemical value for Calvin, this quote also indicates access to Basil in some form before 1540.

The main source for Calvin's polemical use of Basil is found in his *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. This work was a response to the work of Albert Pighius titled *Ten Books on Human Free Choice and Divine Grace*.⁶¹ The first six "books" or chapters of this work were a response to Calvin's second chapter of his 1539 *Institutes*. The final four chapters were a response to the eighth chapter of the same edition of the *Institutes*.⁶² In particular, Pighius challenged Calvin's statement in the 1539 *Institutes* that with the exception of Augustine, the early church fathers were confused, vacillating and contradictory on the subject of free choice. This led Calvin to conclude that the Fathers' views could not be determined with certainty.⁶³ Pighius responded by both refuting Calvin's claims that the Fathers were inconsistent and that Augustine's views were consistent with his own. Calvin responds in turn to both of Pighius' refutations in his *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. As a result, almost one-third of book 3 is

⁶⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:16:8.

⁶¹Ibid., *Bondage and Liberation of Will*, xiv.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., xxi.

made up of quotations from the Fathers.⁶⁴

The reason that Calvin uses Basil polemically against Pighius is that Pighius had sought to use Basil polemically against Calvin. Calvin's response was to show that Pighius had misread the quotes which he introduces from Basil, as well as ignoring Basilan passages which contradicted his argument. Lane summarizes Calvin's standard reply to Pighius' use of the Fathers:

Where Pighius cites a passage which suggests that free choice is unimpaired, Calvin presents him with a dilemma. Either the father was referring to *unfallen* human nature (in opposition to Gnosticism, say), in which case the passage is irrelevant, or he had failed to distinguish between human nature as created and fallen, in which case he was heretical by the standards of later Catholic orthodoxy.⁶⁵

As an example of how Calvin corrects Pighius' misreading of Basil, consider the following section from Calvin's *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*:

From Basil he quotes two passages, of which the former contains nothing but a description of human nature as it was created by God, a description designed to prevent people from passing on to God the blame for the evils they commit. At the beginning therefore he says that sin was not inherent in man's substance, but befell him through his own fault, something which we not only acknowledge but carefully safeguard.⁶⁶

In this section, Calvin uses one of Pighius' own quotations of Basil against him. Pighius' citation of Basil included a description of humanity prior to the Fall, which Pighius attempted to use as a statement regarding the current status of mankind. Calvin's correction of Pighius at this point is typical of his polemical use of Basil in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*.

In addition to correcting Pighius' reading of the quotes from Basil which he had introduced in his own work, Calvin quotes from two additional works attributed to Basil in his

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Lane, *Calvin -Student of the Fathers*, 172.

⁶⁶Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation of Will*, 75.

response. One of these works is the Pseudo-Basilian work *De libero arbitrio*.⁶⁷ The other is from Basil's *Homiliae in Psalmos*.⁶⁸ It is obvious why Calvin chose to reference the first work given its title. The use of the second work is curious however. Why would Calvin search for a quote from Basil on free choice in his sermons on the Psalms? Lane suggests that the reason this quote is included is that Calvin happened to be reading the new translation provided by Janus Cornarius which had just become available.⁶⁹ Pighius used as his source for Basil a Latin translation of Basil's *Opera* by Raphael Maffei Volaterranus.⁷⁰ It is significant that when Calvin responds to citations of Basil by Pighius, he uses the 1540 Cornarius edition.⁷¹ This proves that this edition was in Calvin's possession in 1543, otherwise he would merely have reproduced the quotations from Pighius' version.

Possible Areas of Influence

The question of influence of the Fathers upon John Calvin has been described by one expert of Calvin's use of the Fathers as "an endless and highly speculative matter indeed!"⁷² Making the matter even more speculative is the idea that Calvin was so well read in the patristic writings that he had developed what is called by the Eastern Orthodox "the patristic *phronema* or mindset."⁷³ The presence of this mindset would influence Calvin's thought even in areas where

⁶⁷Lane, 82.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., 164.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," 663.

⁷³Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing," 56. In this interesting article, Mosser argues that the patristic notion of deification of *the sis* is present presuppositionally in Calvin's thought.

no patristic source is cited. Historians are rightly very cautious about reading influence into a context where all that is known with certainty is that Calvin knew and cited certain sources. Clearly, some have carelessly made what Lane has described as “unwarranted claims based on flimsy or non-existent evidence.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, there is sometimes more evidence for influence than is admitted by some scholars. In this section of the paper, both of these tendencies will be displayed. In one case, influence is asserted where there is little or no evidence. In the other, evidence suggesting a possible influence is much more probable, although less than certain.

Gregory of Nazianzus

While Calvin clearly uses Gregory’s quotation on the Trinity as a polemic in four distinct places in his corpus⁷⁵, another Calvin scholar has argued that Calvin’s view of the Trinity was also influenced by Gregory’s treatment of the subject. This argument is made by Thomas F. Torrance in an article titled “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin.”⁷⁶ Although Calvin only quotes from one sentence of Gregory’s *Oration on Holy Baptism* in his treatment of the Trinity in *Institutes* 1:13:17, Torrance argues that Calvin’s view is more in accord with Gregory’s than with Augustine’s whom he cites repeatedly. Admittedly, Torrance’s article appears to be only making a comparison between Calvin’s and Nazianzen’s view of the Trinity. Upon further review, however, Torrance makes some remarkable claims.

⁷⁴Lane, *Calvin -Student of the Fathers*, xii.

⁷⁵In *Institutes* 1:13:17; in *Epistle 607* (January 21, 1545); in his comments on John 1:1 in his *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, and in his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity against Servetus.

⁷⁶Thomas F. Torrance, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin,” *Sobornost* 12 (1990): 7-24. This article is also found in Torrance’s *Trinitarian Perspectives. Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 41-76.

First, Torrance states:

It is certainly true that Calvin cites Augustine far more than any other all through his writings, and refers to him time and again in what he says about the Trinity. However, I find that at every essential point the basic conceptions that Calvin wants to adduce come from Gregory. . .⁷⁷

The only proof that Torrance gives of his claim is by asserting that Augustine was himself “steeped in the teaching of the Greek Fathers.”⁷⁸

Elsewhere, Torrance claims that Calvin’s teaching that Christ shares the name of God with the Father,⁷⁹ he is “taking his cue from both Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzen, who had been followed in this argument by Augustine.”⁸⁰ Again, no source showing that Calvin actually referenced Athanasius or Gregory is given. It is simply assumed and asserted.

In yet another place, Torrance claims that Gregory’s rejection of Basil’s notion of *tropos hyparxeos* (mode of being or existence) is “followed closely by John Calvin, although with some help from St. Augustine.”⁸¹ No citations are given indicating exactly how Gregory is “followed closely by John Calvin.” Once again, a statement is asserted by Torrance without proof being given.

Interestingly, Lane’s analysis of the points of comparison between Calvin and Nazianzen which are asserted by Torrance shows that Calvin did not have access to Gregory’s complete works when the Trinitarian similarities are introduced into the *Institutes*. Of the twenty-seven points of similarity between Calvin and Gregory noted by Torrance, nineteen

⁷⁷Ibid., 7.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:9-11.

⁸⁰Torrance, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” 10.

⁸¹Ibid., 13.

appear before the complete works of Gregory were printed for the first time in 1550.⁸² In the end, one who studies the evidence should conclude that Torrance's assertions concerning the influence upon Calvin by Gregory are a text-book case of what Lane has described as "unwarranted claims based on flimsy or non-existent evidence."⁸³

Basil of Caesarea

A much more promising question of influence upon Calvin by the Cappadocians is found in the discussion of the source for the famous *duplex cognitio* (twofold knowledge) of the opening sentence of the *Institutes*. Calvin's statement that: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."⁸⁴ may be the most famous of all the sentences found in the *Institutes*. Calvin cites no source for the origin of this statement and none immediately presents itself until one combines the search for the *duplex cognitio* with that of Calvin's *theatrum mundi* (theater of the world). Calvin scholar Ford Lewis Battles has performed this search⁸⁵ and his findings will be outlined in what follows.

First, Battles traces Calvin's use of the idea of the creation as a theater to Book 1 of the *Institutes*. There in section 1.14.20 Calvin states,

Meanwhile let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater. For as I have elsewhere said, although it is not the chief evidence of faith, yet it is the first evidence in the order of nature, to be mindful that wherever we cast our eyes, all things they meet are works of God, and at the same time to

⁸²Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 84-85.

⁸³*Ibid.*, xii.

⁸⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1:1.

⁸⁵Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 245-246.

ponder with pious meditation to what end God created them. Therefore, that we may apprehend with true faith what it profits us to know of God, it is important for us to grasp first the history of the creation of the universe, as it has been set forth briefly by Moses (Genesis, chs. 1 and 2) and then has been more fully illustrated by saintly men, especially by Basil and Ambrose.⁸⁶

Battles then compares this statement in the *Institutes* to Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis*. There in his comments on Genesis 1:6, Calvin again alludes to the *theatrum mundi*: "Whatsoever therefore he relates has to do with the adornment of that theater which he sets before our eyes."⁸⁷

Next, the fact that Calvin has already referenced Basil's homilies on Genesis 1 known as *The Hexaemeron*, leads one to compare Basil's comment on Genesis 1:6. There we find not only the source of Calvin's *theatrum mundi*, but something more:

You approach as a ready listener,
one worthy to take your place
in this venerable and blessed theater.
If we learn these things
we will indeed know ourselves,
we will know God:

we will adore Him as Creator,
serve Him as Lord,
glorify Him as Father,
revere Him as Benefactor;
we will not cease to venerate Him
as Author both of our present life
and of the life to come. . . .⁸⁸

This section in Basil, which Calvin seems to clearly reference in his commentary on Genesis and in *Institutes* 1.14.20, also contains words remarkably similar to the beginning sentence of the

⁸⁶Calvin, *Institutes*., 1:14:20.

⁸⁷Cited by Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 245.

⁸⁸Ibid., 245-246.

Institutes. In other words, Basil’s “We will indeed know ourselves, we will know God.”⁸⁹ seems to correspond to Calvin’s “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”⁹⁰

Anthony Lane, however, is suspicious of Battles’ assertion.⁹¹ Lane is adamant that Calvin only read Basil extensively once, around 1542 while preparing for his debate with Pighius. This is based upon the solid evidence already examined in this paper that Calvin obtained a copy of Cornarius’ Latin translation shortly after its publication in 1540. However, this should not rule out Calvin’s possession of another version of Basil prior to 1540. After all, Calvin did refer to Basil’s homilies on the Psalms explicitly in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*.⁹² Also in 1539, Calvin cites Basil in his *Response to Cardinal Sadoletto*. Battles believes that Calvin “clearly” possessed a copy of the 1532 Erasmus edition of Basil.⁹³ Battles also asserts that this edition was “at hand when, in 1535, Calvin was framing the first edition of the *Instituto*.”⁹⁴

On the matter of Basil’s influence on Calvin, two great Calvin scholars disagree. Both of them cannot be correct. The scenario proposed by Battles here of Basil’s influence is much more probable than the one proposed for the influence of Gregory by Torrance. Although the case is not closed, it is believed that Lane in this case is being, in the words of Carl Mosser,

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1:1.

⁹¹For Lane’s response to Battles’ assertion, see Lane, *Calvin - Student of the Fathers*, 79-81.

⁹²Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:16:8.

⁹³Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 246.

⁹⁴Ibid.

“unduly restrictive and open to criticism.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to evaluate the question of whether Calvin may have been influenced by the writings of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus in the development of his thought in two specific areas. Before addressing the possible areas of influence it was necessary to discuss the issues of methodology used in this paper. Next, we surveyed which writings of Basil and Gregory were available to Calvin as sources. Then, we explored Calvin’s primarily polemical use of the Cappadocian Fathers. Finally, we were equipped with enough knowledge to be able to address the two important questions of possible influence : namely the question of Gregory Nazianzen’s possible influence upon Calvin’s doctrine of the Trinity and Basil of Caesarea’s possible influence upon Calvin’s *duplex cognitio*.

In the end, two different conclusions were reached. We rejected Torrance’s claim that Calvin’s doctrine of the Trinity was influenced by Gregory of Nazianzus. Although Calvin clearly used the one citation by Gregory polemically, the absence of evidence of any further influence caused us to reject Torrance’s claim.

However, in regard to Battles’ claim that Basil of Caesarea was the possible source for Calvin’s *duplex cognitio*, we were much more sympathetic. Battles makes a strong case and Lane’s objections are answerable. But ultimately, Basil’s influence can only be said to be probable, not certain.

⁹⁵Carl Mosser, “The Greatest Possible Blessing,” 56, n. 83.

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