

**Continuity or Discontinuity:  
John Calvin and Nicene Christianity**

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## Introduction

Calvin declared that unless we grasp the nature of the Trinity, “only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”<sup>1</sup> He was totally convinced of the necessity of understanding God as revealed in Scripture, one in three and three in one. The most striking aspect of Calvin’s account of the Trinity in the *Institutes* is how very unlike the medieval scholastics it is in form. Some have seen in this discontinuity an intentional break with the past, even up to Nicaea itself, but this perspective is a serious misreading of Calvin and his seminal work. Calvin’s understanding of the Trinity always, even from the earliest days, was decidedly Nicene, and he went to great lengths not to innovate in the ways that have sometimes been suggested. This paper will show Calvin crafted his doctrine of the Trinity in continuity with the established the Nicene orthodoxy that came before him, not in opposition to it.

### The Caroli Affair and Calvin’s Comments about the Creeds

The historical and theological confusion surrounding Calvin’s relationship with Nicaea began with the accusations of Pierre Caroli in 1537. Shortly after Calvin took up reforming the Genevan church, Caroli was appointed chief minister of Lausanne. Caroli faced a rebuke from Calvin over his teaching of prayers for the dead. This seems to have developed a deep-seated animosity on Caroli’s part as he began to try and find ways to denounce the reformer of Geneva.

Caroli seized upon the Confession of Faith for Geneva which avoided technical theological language. In front of a deputation of ministers from Bern, Caroli lashed out with an accusation of Arianism, because he took the avoidance of technical language as a rejection of the Trinity itself. He demanded that Calvin sign the Athanasian Creed to prove his orthodoxy, which

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 120.

Calvin refused to do, offering only his catechism and the *Institutes* as evidence to the contrary. Caroli's accusations eventually shifted from Arianism to Sabellianism, and a synod in Bern was eventually held in order to deal with the confused issue.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's comments during this controversy are of primary importance since they have resulted in numerous understandable misinterpretations of his intentions which in turn have affected the reading of his *Institutes*. One such comment pointed to the phrase "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God" as a battology which showed the Nicene Creed was "a song more suitable for singing than to serve as a formula for confession," casting into doubt the authenticity of the Creed, and the authority of man-made creeds to bind the conscience.<sup>3</sup> In short, Calvin appeared to be rejecting the Creeds, and in so doing cast doubts upon himself which followed him for the rest of his ministry. Indeed, the ministers at the synod "disapproved unanimously of [his] conduct."<sup>4</sup> Schaff extrapolates from these comments that Calvin had a great distaste for both the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Schaff's conclusions do not allow Calvin to speak for himself in the context of the Caroli Affair. Caroli, though an orthodox Trinitarian, was something of a scoundrel, and much of this controversy was powered by the Reformation equivalent of power politics. The primary

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the controversy and the historical details provided see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 72-77, as well as Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, & the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39-45, and B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1954), 206-212.

<sup>3</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 209. Warfield is quoting John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia*, vol. 7 (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 315-316.

<sup>4</sup> Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 1, (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 153.

<sup>5</sup> See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994,) 351 which says Calvin refused to sign the Creed because of the damnatory clauses, "which are unjust and uncharitable" and Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1877), 27 note 1: "Calvin, who had a very high opinion of the Apostles' Creed, depreciates the Nicene Creed, as a '*carmen cantillando magis aptum, quam confessionis formula*' (De Reform. Eccles.)." Cf. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 199 note 22 which offers a point-by-point refutation of Schaff. The Latin quotation of Calvin is actually not even found in the tract in question: "De vera ecclesiae reformatione."

reason for Calvin's refusal to sign the Creeds was to prevent Caroli from gaining a victory by planting in peoples' minds that the signing of the Creeds was necessary on the part of Calvin.<sup>6</sup> Even Caroli recognized that Calvin's statements were neither trusting nor distrusting of the Creeds.<sup>7</sup> Calvin himself actually regretted the comments that he made about the Creeds and said, "I should not have so spoken."<sup>8</sup> In the same letter, Calvin acknowledged the authority of the Creeds themselves and that they should be "beyond controversy."<sup>9</sup> His sole purpose in refusing to sign was to "make it apparent that Caroli's insistence that only in the words of these creeds could faith in the Trinity be fitly expressed was ridiculous."<sup>10</sup> This, of course, does not suggest that Calvin was opposed to the terminology that the Creeds used. He used the same language and terminology extensively in every edition of the *Institutes* from 1536 onwards as well as in his Catechism.

### **Calvin's Use of Trinitarian Terms in the *Institutes***

Even though Calvin used common Trinitarian terms, his wish that terms like "person," "substance," and "essence" could be "buried" seems to reveal a subtle, grudging use of Trinitarian terms throughout the *Institutes* that does rise to the surface from time to time in the form of lamenting their theological necessity.<sup>11</sup> But he went to great lengths to point out the usefulness of said terms in the same passages in his *Institutes*, as long as the meaning behind

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<sup>6</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, 152-153.

<sup>7</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 208 which is quoting Calvin, *Ioannis Calvinii opera omnia*, vol. 7, 316. Caroli's Latin here is so bad, *ego neque credo neque discredo*, that Calvin mockingly refers to it as "Sorbonnic elegance."

<sup>8</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.9.1 where Calvin says that he venerates the councils "from my heart, and desire that they be honored by all," though he admits that he demands that scripture be the highest authority. For Reformed Christians, an understanding that *sola scriptura* and creeds are not mutually contradictory should not be surprising.

<sup>10</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.5

those terms conforms to scripture.<sup>12</sup> These uses include an anti-heretical component as well as a method of explaining biblical-theological truths.<sup>13</sup>

This scriptural focus is important and is one of the most important and noticeable differences between Calvin's *Institutes* and medieval scholastic documents like Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. This scriptural focus is also clearly seen in the Caroli Affair. He labored the point that Trinitarian language should not be an end in itself and that we should not be quarrelers over words. Calvin went into some detail in the use of terms like *homoousios* and their translations between Greek and Latin in order to show that even the Church Fathers were not completely consistent on such issues.<sup>14</sup>

Brian Gerrish has seen in Calvin a biblicism which causes him to deviate from "received dogmatic language" and revise it.<sup>15</sup> Gerrish would say that this particularly affects Calvin's understanding of the Trinity which allows a general acceptance of Trinitarian language while allowing it to be overshadowed by the other theological emphases and discoveries and which prefigured later developments by less orthodox Neo-Protestants. This is, however, a misreading of the Reformer. Though Calvin does show the relative use of Trinitarian terms throughout history, he is placing his own understanding of the terms in the context of the received tradition. For example, he defines "person" through an exegesis of Hebrews 1:3 and shows that it is the same as the Fathers' understanding, who may have disagreed about only the precise terminology

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1.13.3-6.

<sup>13</sup> For anti-heretical use see Ibid., 1.13.4, and for biblical-theological use see Ibid., 1.13.3. The terminology for both uses is borrowed from Arie Baars, "The Trinity," in *The Calvin Handbook*, trans. Gerrit Sheeres, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 245-246 which identifies five separate motives behind Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity: biblical-theological, anti-speculative, pastoral, the relative historical use of terms, and anti-heretical

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.5.

<sup>15</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 207.

to be used for the concept.<sup>16</sup> Calvin goes to lengths in order to show that he is a careful student of the Fathers and the wisdom that they bring.<sup>17</sup>

It is also important to understand the placement of the chapter on the Trinity within the *Institutes* as a whole. When examining the subject matter covered in the rest of the four books, it is discovered that Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity is not some brief excursion for the sake of a received doctrinal system. This chapter is the height of his discussion concerning the doctrine of God, and the rest of the *Institutes* is based on the concepts laid down there. Karl Barth described this understanding as the "natural presupposition" of Calvin's thought.<sup>18</sup> The strong Christology of the work, which is so often declared to be its greatest strength, requires this chapter on the immanent Trinity in order to adequately describe the economic Trinity.

### **The Aseity of the Autothean Son**

The most famous term in Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity came from his controversy with Valentine Gentile, an Italian anti-trinitarian who was part of the Genevan refugee congregation in 1556. Subsequent discovery of his views led to his arrest, escape, and the writing of several polemics back and forth until his 1566 execution in Bern.<sup>19</sup> He used the Melancthon definition of "person," "*persona, substantia intelligens, individua, incommunicabilis*" to say that the Father alone was God, that he alone is *autotheos*, and that the Father gave his essence to the Son in the

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<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2. Gerrish's claims stretch to this area of discussion but are primarily dealing with perceived developments (rather a deemphasis) in Calvin's understanding of eternal generation.

<sup>17</sup> See Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) for details about Calvin's use.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 419. From 416 to 419 Barth criticizes this proto-Schleiermacher reading of Calvin. Barth's condemnation is interesting considering his own previous use of said reading, see Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey D. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 326-329.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, & the Aseity of the Son*, 52.

form of an ontological relationship.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Son should literally be considered a lower form of divinity.

Calvin responded to Gentile as the successor of Michael Servetus and as a dangerous enemy of the Church. His replies were focused around the concept of *autotheos*, and he appropriated Gentile's language and applied it to the Son in order to dismantle the foundations of the anti-trinitarian system. Calvin's conflict with Gentile was not the beginning of his understanding of the Son's aseity. This facet of Calvin's thought is traceable to the earliest portion of his life and is the foundation of his defense against Arianism during the conflict with Caroli, and this defense is the reason Caroli changed his charge from Arianism to Sabellianism.<sup>21</sup> Calvin's ideas concerning aseity are well summarized in the *Institutes* and center around ascribing the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, to Christ himself.<sup>22</sup> Christ is called the eternal God because he is self-existent.<sup>23</sup>

Many scholars are divided about whether this focus on Christ as *autotheos* should be considered a notable deviation from Nicene orthodoxy. Robert Reymond has radically read Calvin's theology as being a critique of "subordinationism implicit in the Nicene language."<sup>24</sup> It

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 54-55, and Philip Melancthon, *Loci communes rerum theologicarum* (Wittenberg, 1543), loc. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, & the Aseity of the Son*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13. 9 and 20. The significance in this move is that YHWH is the revealed covenant name of God which is revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Its literal translation is "I AM WHO I AM" which is a statement of God's absolute self-existence. In §9, Calvin went to Jeremiah 23:5-6 where the branch of Jesse is directly called "Jehovah our Righteousness." In the Septuagint of the third century, YHWH was translated into Greek as *kyrios*. In §20 Calvin showed that Paul in II Corinthians 12:8-9 prayed to *kyrios* and received an answer from Christ. In §14 the Spirit's divinity is shown by his participation in the divine work. See also Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 1, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia*, vol. 11, 560.

<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 327. He also concludes that Nicaea should actually be rejected on these grounds. Reymond walked back these claims in the second edition, as well as other severely problematic claims such as a denial of the numerical identity of substance in the Persons of the Trinity. Much of my argument against Reymond below can be found to a fuller extent in Paul Owen, "Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism: An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity and his Appeal to John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 35/2 (2000), 262-281.

Several scholars have variations of subordinationism inside Nicaea. Torrance says that Calvin is pulling his understanding of the Trinity primarily from Gregory of Nazianzus, over against Basil and Gregory of Nyssa who had subordinationist tendencies; see T. F. Torrance, "Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin" in

is ironic that both Reymond and Caroli understood Calvin as being outside the Fathers, though they had different reactions to this departure. Calvin himself explicitly said he was drawing from Athanasius.<sup>25</sup> This was actually the reason for Gentile's dislike of Athanasius, whose views are generally considered almost the definition of Nicene.<sup>26</sup> Bellarmine, one of the primary Roman Catholic polemicists of his day, understood that, despite the difference in form, Calvin's theology of the Son was no different in content from other orthodox Trinitarians.<sup>27</sup> The most that can be said of Calvin on this point is that he has a *different* reading of the Nicene Fathers, not that he moves away from them.

### **Eternal Generation of the Son**

The largest potential point of conflict with Nicaea in Calvin's theology lies in his understanding of the eternal generation of the Son. As Lewis Ayres points out, affirmation of eternal generation is part of the definition of being "pro-Nicene."<sup>28</sup> If Calvin can truly be said to

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*Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 22, 57-58. Douglas Kelly appears to be influenced by Torrance and adopts his position; see Douglas F. Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2008), 65-89. There is startlingly little evidence of Calvin pulling directly from Gregory of Nazianzus besides one quote in 1.13.17. It is highly speculative to say essentially that Calvin only quoted Augustine for his audience, and Lane makes a convincing argument that Calvin was not fundamentally reliant on Gregory; see Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 68-69. Warfield is more careful, though he does speak about Calvin using a principle of "equalization" as opposed to subordination, by which he means Augustinian vs. Athanasian, Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 230. Though I tremble to disagree with Warfield, this understanding of Nicene theology seems overly reliant on a Latin/Greek dichotomy, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 364-383.

Finally, it should be noted that Calvin closes his chapter on the Trinity by defending both Irenaeus and Tertullian from the charges of subordinationism. If Calvin was willing to defend both Apologists from the charge, which is more warranted, how much more willing would he have been to defend the Nicene Fathers?

<sup>25</sup> "*Quid hac impudentia foedius? Atque haec una furendi caus, quod Athanasius filium facit authotheos*" in Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia*, vol. 9, 368.

<sup>26</sup> Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 328 which also points out that this was much to the embarrassment of the Roman Catholic Church!

<sup>28</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 236. His definition has three points: (1) "a clear version of the person and nature distinction, entailing the principle that whatever is predicated of the divine nature is predicated of the three persons equally and understood to be one (this distinction may or may not be articulated via a consistent technical terminology)"; (2) "clear expression that eternal generation



deny eternal generation, then his doctrine must be considered heretical based on the classical definition used throughout the church. Calvin did describe the phrase “God of God” as a hard saying in the Nicene Creed.<sup>29</sup> His seeming dislike of the phrase has been the focus of both Reymond’s and Gerrish’s arguments.<sup>30</sup> He also said that the Son “has his origin from the Father, as he is the Son; an origin not of time, nor of essence.”<sup>31</sup> Instead he proceeds from the Father in respect of Person.<sup>32</sup> This unique idea of making person the focus of eternal generation is an outflowing of Calvin’s focus on aseity. He is trying very carefully to make an accurate differentiation between the person and nature.<sup>33</sup> Because the Son is God fully and exists in and of himself, there was no other place in Calvin’s mind for the focus besides person.<sup>34</sup>

It should be noted that Calvin’s seemingly unique emphases are in the context of sections that directly argue against anti-trinitarian ideas, particularly Gentile’s, which made eternal generation have ontological implications. Even though Calvin said the phrase “God of God” was a hard saying, he nonetheless justified it using an interpretation from Athanasius.<sup>35</sup> Also, the strict division between communication of essence vs. communication of person has been slightly exaggerated.<sup>36</sup> Calvin does not appear to have adhered to it strictly outside of an anti-trinitarian

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of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine being”; and (3) “clear expression of the doctrine that the persons work inseparably.”

<sup>29</sup> “*Sed verba consilii Nicaeni sonat, Deum esse ad Deo. Dura loquutio, fateor*”; Calvin, *Ioannis Calvinii opera omnia*, vol. 9, 368.

<sup>30</sup> Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 329 and Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 207. Reymond admits that Calvin often uses the language of begetting but says that Calvin used the language only to give “the relational order of priority to the Father.” Thus, Calvin is denying the idea of communication of essence. Gerrish says that Calvin’s downplaying of eternal generation is a prefiguring of Schleiermacher.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.25.

<sup>33</sup> See first point of Ayres’s definition in fn. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin’s simple position has been pointed to by Warfield who claims that Calvin is not rejecting the Nicene Creed and its understanding of eternal generation, only the Nicene Fathers’ speculation regarding eternal generation see Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 250.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Ioannis Calvinii opera omnia*, vol. 9, 368.

<sup>36</sup> Brannon Ellis has gone to great lengths to try and show the differences between communication of essence and communication of person, but the distinction is simply not consistent in Calvin or in those after Calvin. Beza directly spoke of communication of essence after he succeeded Calvin, which seems to cast doubt on a great,

context.<sup>37</sup> He just rejected the idea of “eternally on-going communication of divine being to the Son, that is, as a kind of continuous emanation from the Father.”<sup>38</sup>

Calvin’s understanding of eternal generation in the *Institutes* has a few unique ideas, but these are in line with Nicaea. What is important in pro-Nicene orthodoxy is maintaining a non-ontological understanding of eternal generation. His move to describe eternal generation as dealing with person and not essence was a limited move with questionable significance to the whole of his system. Passages of seeming contradiction are easily explained when looking at the context of his thought. Though it may be too much to say that Calvin was “devoid of originality,” his understanding of the Trinity strove to be in continuity with the Nicene fathers.<sup>39</sup> If he had any innovation, it was merely applying orthodox Trinitarianism vigorously in anti-trinitarian contexts.

### Implications for the Church

The Church needs to have confidence in the historicity of its doctrines. Reformed Christians cannot afford to cut themselves off from the Early Church and must maintain an identity as Reformed Catholics. Past theologians have striven to be in line with the Bible and develop language which more accurately describes its truths. When the Church decouples from

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purposeful innovation by Reformed Christianity, cited in Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 274. It is also of note that Bellarmine reads Calvin as believing in communication of essence, though Warfield finds Bellarmine lacking; see Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 258-259. Though Ellis is somewhat outside of the bounds of this paper, his argument that communication of essence implies subordinationism does not seem to do full justice to the appropriate caveats that it is an eternally completed action. Trinitarian theologians have always reserved the right to use language that they admit is not fully precise to get at truths revealed in scripture.

<sup>37</sup> See Hermann A. Niemeyer, *Collectio confessionum in ecclesiis reformatis publicatarum* (Leipzig: Julius Klinkhardt, 1840), 130 which has Calvin’s catechism of 1545: “M. *Cur Filium Dei unicum nuncupas: quum hac quoque appellatione nos omnes dignetur Deus? P. Quod filii Dei sumus, non id habemus a natura, sed adoption et gratia duntaxat: quod scilicet nose o loc habeat Deus. At Dominus Iesus, qui ex substantia Patris est genitus, uniusque cum Patre essentiae est, optimo iure Filius Dei unicum vocatur: quum solus sit natura.*” Notice the direct statement of *ex substantia Patris* which is a clear use of the language of both Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds.

<sup>38</sup> Torrance, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*, 63 n. 102.

<sup>39</sup> François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 169.

its past and jettisons historical ways of expressing doctrine, dangerous problems in wording develop. Reymond ran into this precise problem when he encouraged his readers not to be in line with Nicaea. The rest of his theology suffered from severe problems like a denial of numerical unity of substance in the Godhead.

Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity in particular is also of use to the Church. His chapter thirteen offers an excellent summary of the complexities surrounding Trinitarian language with a focus upon scripture. His language of *autotheos* is a useful reminder of divine unity. But the real benefit to the Church is watching his doctrine unfold and undergird the rest of the *Institutes*. It is here that the economic and immanent descriptions of the Trinity can begin to overlap and reinforce each other.

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