

God, Christ and the Spirit in Luther and Calvin's commentaries on the Letter to Philemon

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The aim of this contribution is to illustrate the way in which the interpretation of Scripture is influenced by one's presuppositions by investigating the different ways in which two well-known Reformers, Luther and Calvin, depicted God, Christ and the Spirit in their commentaries on the Letter to Philemon. It is shown how their own views influenced the way in which they interpreted the letter and appropriated it for their own times. The most striking difference between the two commentaries is that Luther's interpretation of the letter was dominated by a Christocentric view (he even often read Christ – and sometimes also Satan – in between the lines of the letter where Paul did not explicitly mention him), whereas an opposite tendency may be noted in Calvin's interpretation of the letter (he tended to bring God – and sometimes even certain dogmatic concepts regarding God – into the picture when Paul did not explicitly refer to God).

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article illustrates the importance of historical perspectives for Biblical Studies, in particular for the interpretation of Biblical texts.

Keywords: New Testament; Letter to Philemon; history of reception; Trinity; Luther; Calvin.

Introduction

The importance of the God question for our theological endeavours can hardly be overstated. One of the interesting developments in this regard is the growing interest in the way in which theologians of the past viewed God. As Rian Venter (2019) puts it:

One feature of the new enthusiasm is a historical interest, a return to major minds in Christian theology, for example, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine, Thomas, Calvin and Edwards, and a re-evaluation of their theo-contributions. (p. 1)

As a New Testament scholar, one of the issues that interests me greatly is the way in which our interpretation of Scripture is influenced by our presuppositions, often without our even being aware of them. This is the issue that I wish to illustrate in this study. I will look at the ways in which two Reformers interpreted the Letter to Philemon and, in particular, the different ways in which they depicted God, Christ and the Spirit in their commentaries on this letter. I hope to show how their views in this regard influenced the ways in which they interpreted the letter and appropriated it for their own times.

Let us first have a look at the occasion of Paul's correspondence with Philemon. From the brief letter, one can gain the following: according to 1:1–2, while he was imprisoned, Paul (and Timothy) wrote the letter (the place and nature of his imprisonment are not indicated) to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church regularly meeting in Philemon's house. From the fact that Paul switches to the singular (1:4), it is clear that the letter was directed primarily to Philemon. The issue that dominates the letter is the situation of Onesimus, who had been a slave in Philemon's household but had left his household (he was not a believer at that stage; 1:10, 16), ending up with Paul. The letter does not provide any information about the type of slave that Onesimus was (e.g. a household slave or not), his place of origin or how long he had been a slave at that stage. That Onesimus belonged to Philemon is clear from the fact that Paul appeals directly to him (1:10) and also indicates his willingness to compensate him for any damage that Onesimus might have caused him (1:18–19). The letter does not refer to the reason why Onesimus had left nor how it had happened that he ended up with Paul. However, it is clear that Onesimus was converted by Paul, that he served Paul in some way

Note: Special Collection: Trinity.

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while Paul was imprisoned and that Paul has a deep affection for him. Scholars interpret these details in various ways to arrive with a more detailed picture.¹

God is mentioned twice explicitly in the letter, in 1:3 (in the salutation; ‘God our Father’) and 4 (in the thanksgiving; ‘my God’) and twice implicitly in what may be interpreted as divine passives, in 1:15 (‘he was separated from you’) and 1:22 (‘that I will be granted to you’).² Christ is mentioned more often: in 1:1 (‘Christ Jesus’), 1:3 (‘the Lord Jesus Christ’), 1:5 (‘the Lord Jesus’), 1:6 (‘Christ’), 1:8 (‘Christ’), 1:9 (‘Christ Jesus’), 1:16 (‘the Lord’), 1:20 (‘the Lord’ and ‘Christ’), 1:23 (‘Christ Jesus’) and 1:25 (‘the Lord Jesus Christ’). Paul does not refer explicitly to the Spirit in the letter, but as will become clear below, this does not prevent the two Reformers from mentioning the Spirit in their comments.

Martin Luther

Luther lectured on the Letter to Philemon in Wittenberg in 1527, at a time when a plague raged in the city and many people had moved to Jena. Nevertheless, he stayed on in the city, lecturing on 1 John, Titus, Philemon and 1 Timothy (Lull 2003:49). He lectured on Philemon on 16–17 December 1527. The lectures were recorded by George Rörer, but he did not revise his notes; in fact, they were not edited for publication at that stage. This only happened much later, in the 20th century (ed. Pelikan 1968:ix–x; see also Kooiman 1961:189).

Luther begins his lectures on Philemon by describing the letter as a private and domestic letter (WA 25, 69.27³), but he also immediately points out that even in such a private matter, Paul does not hesitate to introduce the *locus* of Christ. From this, Luther deduces that there is not any topic so ordinary that Christ is not present in some way (WA 25, 69.27–70.3). He repeats this view at the beginning of his second lecture on Philemon (delivered on 17 December 1527, beginning at 1:7): Paul always talks and writes about Christ – something not found in theologians after the apostles and not even among the other apostles (WA 25, 73.16–20). From this, the strong Christological emphasis in Luther’s commentary is already clear. Later on, he even interprets Paul’s appeal for Onesimus (‘I appeal to you on behalf of my child ...’, 1:10) as an act of justification on Paul’s part: Paul takes upon himself Onesimus’s sins against Philemon, justifying him to Philemon (WA 25, 75.12–14).⁴ Accordingly, Luther views the letter primarily as an example to the church of how believers should take care of fellow-believers who have erred and fallen spiritually (WA 25, 78.26–28). He ends his lectures on Philemon with the words: ‘The kingdom of Christ [*take note of*

this description!] is a kingdom of mercy, grace. The kingdom of Satan is a kingdom of homicide, error and darkness, lies’ (WA 25, 78.28–29).

The way in which Luther ends his lectures on the letter brings us to a second interesting characteristic of his exegesis, namely the way in which he introduces Satan in his reception of the letter. Although Paul never refers to Satan in the letter, Luther regularly mentions him in his comments (as he does in the case of the Spirit, too; see the discussion further on). Luther’s emphasis on the role of Satan is one of the characteristics of his theology. As Batka (2014:248) notes, ‘[T]he concept of the devil, Satan, and antichrist belong to the core of Luther’s theological language and personal conviction’. Apart from mentioning Satan at the end of the lectures, Luther also mentions him several other times in the letter. In his comments on 1:2, he explains that Archippus was the ‘bishop’ of the city (according to Col 4:17) and draws attention to the fact that Paul calls him a ‘fellow-soldier’, noting that a bishop is a leader in the Word and thus has to battle against Satan, death and sin (WA 25, 71.10–19). Commenting on the expression ‘the faith which you [i.e. Philemon] have toward the Lord’ (1:5), Luther remarks that Paul gives thanks for Philemon’s faith, as Satan is always lying in wait for him (WA 25, 72.10). In his comments on 1:6, Luther highlights (among other things) Paul’s prayer that Philemon may recognise all the good that is in Christ and emphasises the importance of knowledge as the basis of Christian doctrine (*Christiana doctrina*). According to Luther, the most important thing for Christians is to grow in the knowledge of Christ. He then continues: over against such knowledge of Christ stand sin, a weak conscience and death; in fact, Satan tries to ‘frighten’ and ‘persecute’ such knowledge (WA 25, 73.1–8). In his explanation of 1:15, Luther interprets Paul’s statement that Onesimus might have been separated from Philemon so that Philemon might have Onesimus back forever as an attempt on Paul’s part to mitigate Onesimus’s sin. He also contrasts such behaviour with that of the devil who does exactly the opposite: he always makes sin worse. Luther adds that the devil even makes laughter a mortal sin (*peccatum mortale*; WA 25, 76.31–32). From these examples, it is clear that Luther’s views on Satan’s role had quite an impact on his reception of the letter.

A third characteristic of Luther’s interpretation of the letter that should be noted briefly is the extent to which it was influenced by his own struggles with – primarily – the Catholic Church and, to a minor extent, with people he calls ‘heretics’ or ‘fanatics’. He refers to the Catholic Church three times. The first occurrence is found in his explanation of 1:2, where Paul refers to Archippus (who, according to Luther, was a bishop) as a *fellow-soldier*. Luther draws attention to what he regards as Paul’s humility and then notes that the pope would never follow Paul’s example: he would never refer to another bishop as his fellow-pope (WA 25, 71.17–20). In the second instance, Luther’s argument is more or less similar: according to 1:9, Paul appeals to Philemon instead of using the authority that he has in Christ. Luther contrasts this

1. For an overview of proposals, see Tolmie (2010:1–27).

2. In 1:16 and 1:20, κύριος most likely refers to Christ and not to God. See Barth and Blanke (2000:451).

3. References are to the *Weimarer Ausgabe* of Luther’s works (Luther 1902). I have also consulted the English translation by Pelikan (ed. 1968:93–105).

4. Wolter (2010:170–171) describes Luther’s interpretation as a form of allegory: ‘The interaction in which Paul, Philemon and Onesimus are bound together in Phlm, is allegorically correlated with the soteriological interaction between God, Christ and sinners ... the role of God is allotted to Philemon, the role of Christ to Paul himself, while Onesimus stands in the position of the sinners’.

with the attitude of the pope and other officials in the Catholic Church who, according to him, would never act in such a way and would never humble themselves in such a way (WA 25, 74.28–30). The remarks in his discussion of 1:14 are even harsher. Considering the notion of goodness done voluntarily, he notes that God does not want compulsory service from us. He contrasts such an attitude with the Catholic Church: according to him, monks serve under compulsion and the pope orders the entire church by means of commandments, and thus this church is not a church of Christ; it is rather a synagogue and such people are not really of the church but of the law (WA 25, 76.17–26).

Luther also twice attacks other people whom he refers to as ‘heretics’ and ‘fanatics’. In his discussion of 1:4–5, he mentions that Paul experienced problems with false prophets, believers who forsook their faith and started heresies and sects, adding ‘just as we do’ (WA 25, 72.2–4). In his comments on 1:6, he refers in negative terms to two other groups. He offers a eucharistic interpretation of the concept ‘sharing of your faith’, namely that it refers to the body shared in the bread of the eucharist. He then refers to people who reject such an interpretation as *tropici*, or rather, *topici* or *subversores* (WA 25, 72.29). Pelikan (ed. 1968) explains:

Tropici would be exegetes who distorted, or “subverted,” a “trope,” or figure of speech, while *topici* would appear to be exegetes who, in the process, managed also to “subvert” the subject matter or content itself. (p. 97)

Luther does not provide more information, but it is clear that he has in mind people whose views of the eucharist differ from his. Further on in his comments on 1:6, he refers disapprovingly to another group of people. Emphasising that good doctrine should be based on knowledge, he berates ‘fanatics’ (he uses the German word *Schwermeri*) who listen to the Word and then wrongly assume that they know everything – as if they have been filled with the Spirit (WA 25, 73.5–7).

Let us now turn to what we can gain from Luther’s lectures on Philemon on his views of God, Christ and the Spirit.

God

Luther does not spend much time on God in his two lectures on the letter, most likely because of the Christological emphasis that has already been pointed out above. Strangely, he does not even spend any time on God in the four instances in which Paul directly or indirectly refers to God in the letter (as pointed out at the beginning of this study: 1:3, 4, 15 and 22). Of these, the absence of any reference to God’s providence in Luther’s discussion of 1:15 seems particularly strange, as at this stage there already existed a long exegetical tradition (going back to Jerome and Chrysostom) interpreting this verse as indicating that God used evil to bring about good things.⁵

5. For more details, see Tolmie (2021:309–311). For the important role that the Church Fathers and the medieval exegetical tradition played in Luther’s exegesis, see Herrmann (2014:71–90).

However, in his discussion of the letter, Luther introduces God on two other occasions where Paul does not explicitly refer to God. First, Paul’s statement in 1:11 that Onesimus was once useless to Philemon but has now become useful to both Philemon and Paul is interpreted as Onesimus’s running away having a fortunate outcome: one evil deed giving rise to a double good one (i.e. to Philemon and to Paul, respectively). Luther continues: a single sin led to double justice, that is, towards God⁶ and towards Paul (WA 25, 75.19–22). Unfortunately, he does not explain this further, and one is thus left to speculate on what he had in mind. It seems as if ‘justice towards God’ refers to the fact that Onesimus has repented from his sin of running away and was on his way back to serve Philemon. What Luther meant by ‘justice towards Paul’ is unclear. Even so, a particular view of God emerges here, namely that when slaves abscond, they are sinning against God.

The second instance (1:14) has already been discussed above when Luther’s polemics against the Catholic Church were highlighted, but let us now look specifically at the way in which he pictures God⁷ in this instance. Taking up the notion of free will that Paul mentions here, he points out that Christians should not do anything under compulsion; they should always act out of free will. He links this to 2 Corinthians 9:7 (believers should not give under compulsion) and emphasises that this was meant as instruction to the whole church. God does not want service performed under compulsion. It is true that children might be taught how to serve by compelling them to do certain things, but this should not be the case with adults. Interestingly, Luther also remarks that Paul was not really worried that Philemon would not act out of free will but wrote this in order to give a rule (*regula*) to Christians that they should not act under compulsion. Luther then uses three other references to Scripture: Malachi 1:10, the second part of 2 Corinthians 9:7 (God loves a cheerful giver) and Romans 12:8 – all to the effect that Christians should not act under compulsion (WA 25, 76.15–28).

Christ

Earlier on, the strong Christological emphasis in Luther’s exposition of the letter was noted, as well as the fact that he views Paul’s appeal for Onesimus as an event in terms of which Paul was ‘justifying’ Onesimus to Philemon. Such a Christological emphasis is also found elsewhere in the letter. For example, in his comments on the expression ‘in Christ’ in 1:6, he emphasises the importance of knowledge for Christian doctrine (*doctrina*), since for him the most important aspect of being a Christian is growing in the knowledge of Christ (he refers to 2 Pt 3:18; WA 25, 73.2–4). In addition to linking Christ to doctrine, three other emphases may be detected in Luther’s remarks on Christ:

6. From the context it is not clear whether Luther is referring to the triune God or God the Father.

7. It seems as if Luther has God the Father in mind in this instance, but it is not entirely sure.

Firstly, he links our relationship to Christ to our care for fellow-believers. He already mentions this at the outset, during the discussion of the *argumentum* of the letter, by referring to the letter as a piece of art (*artificium*) and an example (*exemplum*) to be followed: as we realise that we please Christ, we have confidence to strengthen our fallen brothers; we bear with them and reconcile them in order to destroy the works of the devil and restore the works of Christ (WA 25, 70.11–15). In the discussion of Paul's reference to Onesimus as 'a beloved brother' in 1:16, Luther returns to this idea: Onesimus was 'beloved' as a result of the 'gospel of Christ'; he was a beloved of Philemon and even more a beloved of Paul (WA 25, 77.8–11).

Secondly, Luther quite often highlights what he believes to be attempts on Paul's part to promote his own authority by referring to Christ. He interprets Paul's self-description in 1:1 ('Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus') as an attempt by Paul to convey his authority to Philemon: Paul refers to Christ so that it should be clear to Philemon that he is not making the request in the letter on his own. Luther adds that we are not prone to use force in such a way, but that it is sometimes necessary (WA 25 71.24–27). In 1:7, Paul praises Philemon for the way in which he had refreshed the entrails of the saints. Luther explains Paul's rhetorical strategy as follows: Philemon's faith, love and everything that he has in Christ make Paul confident that their friendship is of such a nature that he may command Philemon and that Philemon will obey him. Luther calls this 'good flattery' (*bona titillatio*), even 'holy' flattery,⁸ as it is something that is done 'in Christ'. According to him, this type of praise does not focus on the person being praised, but on Christ who is in that person (WA 25, 74.4–12). In his discussion of 1:20 (where Paul expresses his hope that Philemon will cause him joy), Luther argues along the same lines: Paul refers to Philemon as a Christian; fellow-believers should not be regarded as flesh and blood but as believers who are in Christ (WA 25.78.1–5). In his explanation of 1:8 ('Although I have great confidence in Christ to command you ...'), he emphasises the expression 'in Christ', noting that Paul lays hold on Philemon in Christ, and then remarks in a more general sense that people should trust one another but that Christ should be between them (WA 25, 74.13–15). The expression 'a prisoner of Christ' in the next verse is explained in a similar way: Paul was commissioned with the authority of the gospel and Philemon was his disciple. However, Paul chose not to appeal to the authority that he had but rather dealt with Philemon as a brother (WA 25, 27–29). Thus, from this brief overview, it is clear that Luther gave much thought to the way in which Paul uses his own relationship to Christ as a rhetorical strategy to persuade Philemon to heed his request. Yet, it should also be noted that Luther also deliberately tried moving beyond regarding this as a mere rhetorical ploy, as he spent time on interpreting it from a theological perspective.

8. Earlier on, Luther also used the expression 'holy flattery' when he explained the rhetorical effect of Archippus being called 'a fellow-soldier' in 1:2 (WA 25.71.13–20). Take note that the same expression is used by Erasmus in his *Annotationes* on Romans (1:12): *Haec est pia vafrities, et sancta, ut ita dixerim, adulatio.*

Thirdly, Luther also refers to Christ in his explanation of the concept 'chains of the gospel' in 1:13 ('in order that on your behalf he [i.e. Onesimus] might serve me in the gospel'), but in this case he does not emphasise the notion of authority. He points out that it is a fine expression and notes that it does not mean that the gospel and Christ were imprisoned. He moves on to another idea, namely that Christians may boast (in such a situation as Paul finds himself), as imprisonment is not for one's own sake but for the glory of the gospel. Thus, if imprisonment is caused by Christ, one has cause for joy (WA 25, 76.5–13).

The Spirit

As I indicated in the introduction, Paul does not mention the Spirit explicitly in the letter. Nevertheless, Luther refers to it four times in his exposition of the letter. The first of these has already been mentioned above, namely the berating remark about 'fanatics' (in the comments on 1:6) who listen to the Word and then wrongly assume that they know everything as if they have been filled with the Spirit. In the other three instances, Luther introduces the Spirit when discussing some of the positive remarks that Paul makes in the letter. The first is found in the comments on 1:4–5 (the thanksgiving of the letter). Luther notes that such a feeling of thanksgiving (as expressed by Paul here) comes from the Spirit; we are so used to hearing of evil that it is truly a cause for thanksgiving if we hear of somebody who stays faithful to the Word, as Philemon did. Such thankfulness comes from the gospel or the Spirit (WA 25, 72.1–5). The second instance occurs in the comments on 1:6, in which case Luther links the concept 'knowledge of the good' to the Spirit. He stresses the importance of solid knowledge for our faith, adding that we need the Spirit for this; the Spirit helps us to know what we have received: salvation, justification, redemption from every evil, eternal life, brotherhood of Christ, being fellow-heirs of Christ and heirs of God. The Spirit is the one who helps such knowledge grow (WA 25, 73.20–24). The third occurrence is found towards the end of the second lecture, in the comments on 1:15. As indicated above, Luther does not interpret Paul's words 'for perhaps for this reason he was separated from you for a while' as a reference to God's action. Instead, he focuses on the way in which Paul tries to mitigate Onesimus's misdeed by this statement: Paul confesses that running away was a sin, but he also does his best to extenuate Onesimus's sin. This is linked to the work of the Spirit: extenuating sin is the work of the Spirit. Whereas the devil does exactly the opposite (making sin even worse), the Spirit extenuates sin; as there is forgiveness of sin, the Spirit takes sin away fully (WA 25, 76.21–23).

To summarise the first part of this investigation: in Luther's reception of the letter, a strong Christological emphasis is noticed, to such an extent that he even views the letter as an attempt by Paul to justify Onesimus to Philemon. Apart from this, he also refers to Christ quite often in his explanation of the letter, in three contexts: that our relationship to Christ determines our relationship to our fellow-believers, that Paul made use of his authority in Christ (an aspect that he

interprets theologically and not merely as a rhetorical strategy) and that one should rejoice if Christ is the cause for one's imprisonment. God receives much less attention: Luther does not even discuss God in the four cases in which Paul directly or indirectly refers to God; however, he introduces references to God in two instances when Paul does not mention God, and in both cases the emphasis falls on ethics (for slaves to run away from their masters is a sin, and God does not want believers to serve under compulsion). We have also seen that Luther introduces the Spirit several times in his exposition of the letter (as he does with Satan), even though Paul does not refer to the Spirit. In all instances, he stresses the role that the Spirit plays in generating spiritual benefits: enabling believers to thank God, deepening the knowledge of all the good things that they have in Christ and extenuating sin.

John Calvin

Calvin's commentary on the Letter to Philemon was published in 1551, that is, more than two decades after that of Luther. The Latin version of the commentary was published as part of a set, but the French translation that appeared in the same year was published as a separate volume (Holder 2006:256). From the commentary, it is clear that Calvin is impressed by the way in which Paul treats what Calvin believed to be an insignificant matter (about a slave who ran away and was a thief, whom Paul returns to his master, asking him to forgive his slave), raising what Calvin believes to be an insignificant matter to God in a sublime manner. For Calvin, the letter is about *aequitas* ('equity' or 'compassion'), something that Paul discusses with so much emphasis in the letter that it looks as if he is thinking of the church as a whole and not only a single slave (*ad Philm. arg.* [CO 52.441.14–24]⁹). The concept *aequitas* that Calvin emphasises plays an important role in his views on ethics and occurs regularly in his writings. Haas (1997) summarises Calvin's views in this regard as follows:

Equity calls believers to show the same love, compassion and self-sacrifice to others that God has shown to them in Christ. It is integrally related to union with Christ, for in this union the Holy Spirit imparts to believers the new way of life that they already have in Christ. Christ is the source, foundation, and power for the transformed life that moves believers to deal with their neighbours in love. (p. 123)

Furthermore, Calvin also views the Letter to Philemon as an excellent example of Paul's modesty, humility and gentleness; in fact, Calvin suggests that this letter is the best expression of Paul's gentleness (*mansuetudo*) that we have (*ad Philm. arg.* [CO 52.441.23–25]).

Unlike Luther, Calvin does not spend any time in his commentary on people or groups who do not share his views. Instead, the impression one receives is of somebody thoughtfully interpreting the letter for pastors and believers of his time. I briefly mention two examples. In his discussion

of 1:8–9, he draws the attention of pastors to the fact that Paul does not command Philemon but rather appeals to him; accordingly, Calvin stresses that pastors should follow Paul's example by treating their members gently rather than trying to force them (CO 52.444.34–35). And in the comments on 1:13 (Paul's request that Onesimus should continue serving him while he is imprisoned), Calvin appeals to all believers to support fellow-believers suffering for the gospel (CO 52.445.53–446.4).

God

In Luther's lectures, we witnessed a strong Christological emphasis. In Calvin's commentary, the emphasis is clearly on God and not on Christ. As was noted at the beginning of this study, Paul mentions God only four times directly and indirectly in the letter. In his commentary, Calvin introduces God much more often when he explains Paul's letter. This is already seen in the introduction to the commentary, where he notes that Paul uses the letter to raise an insignificant matter in a sublime manner to God¹⁰ (CO 52.441.14–18). In the rest of the commentary, Calvin refers to God regularly, quite often in instances where Paul does not mention God explicitly.

In his explanation of 1:4–5 (part of the thanksgiving of the letter), he begins by pointing out that Paul does not only praise Philemon, but he also prays for him. From this, he deduces that one even has to pray for the most exemplary believers so that God can help them to persevere and to make spiritual progress every day (CO 52.442.19–24). In his final comment in the letter, on Demas (in 1:24), Calvin uses Demas's (later) desertion of Paul to highlight the same idea: we should never rely too much on our own zeal; we should rather ask God for perseverance (*constantia*; CO 52.45.1–7). Further on in his discussion of 1:4–5, he again refers to God when he explains the expression 'love and faith towards the Lord Jesus and towards all the saints'. He stresses that faith in Christ is the only way to attain knowledge of God the Father and explains that the love that Paul has in mind implies that we should love our own flesh, in particular the image of God (*Deo imago*) inscribed into us. This implies that we should love all humans, but in particular fellow-believers, since that is what God expects of us (CO 52.442.26–41).

In his comments on the expression 'all the good that is in you in Christ [εἰς Χριστόν] (1:6), Calvin remarks that the words εἰς Χριστόν could be interpreted as meaning 'towards Christ', but that he prefers to understand it as meaning ἐν Χριστῷ ('in Christ') explaining that God's gifts are given to us only if we are 'in Christ' (CO 52.443.38–42).

In the discussion of 1:10, he again introduces the concept 'image of God', but with a slightly different emphasis from the way in which it was used in 1:4. In 1:4, he focused on the fact that we should love ourselves and other humans, because the image of God is inscribed into us. Now the emphasis falls on God as the One who spiritually regenerates us. The point

9. References are to the edition of Baum, Cunitz and Reuss (eds. [1895] 1964). I also consulted the English translations of Pringle ([1856] 1948) and Smail ([1964] 1996).

10. From the context, it is not clear whether Calvin is referring to the triune God or God the Father. This is also true of the other instances discussed in this section.

of departure is Paul's statement that he 'begot' Onesimus. Calvin explains that this was not something that happened by Paul's own power, as it is only God who can reshape and reform (*refingere et reformare*) someone to (*ad*) the image of God. He further explains that regeneration occurs through faith and faith comes from hearing, and thus the one who 'administers doctrine' fulfils the role of a (spiritual) father. Furthermore, when God's word (*sermo Dei*) is proclaimed, it is the seed of eternal life, and thus the one proclaiming it is rightly referred to as 'father'. However, although humans play a role in this regard, it is God who regenerates a human through the power of the Spirit. Thus, there is no opposition between God and humans in this event; it should rather be seen as an indication of what God achieves through humans (CO 52.445.4–21). In the discussion of the expression *σπλάγγνα* or *viscera* that Paul uses in 1:12 to refer to Onesimus a little while later, Calvin describes the matter from the perspective of Onesimus: he converted to God, an event that always has to be taken seriously (CO 52.445.31–34).

In his exposition of Paul's reference to goodness done voluntarily in 1:14, Calvin elucidates that Paul is giving a particular application of a general rule (*regula*), according to which only sacrifices given freely to God please him. He also refers to 2 Corinthians 9:7, where the same is said of almsgiving (CO 52.446.5–9).

As indicated in the introduction to this study, the passive in 1:15 ('he was separated from you') may be interpreted as a divine passive. In his comments on this verse, Luther does not refer to God's actions or purpose. In Calvin's case, the opposite happens; in fact, he offers a lengthy discussion of the way in which God sometimes uses evil for his own purpose, among others employing the concept 'providence' (*providentia*; CO 52.446.33) and even 'hidden providence' (*occulta providentia*; CO 52.447.32–33). He begins by referring to the way in which God's providence was seen when the evil things that befell Joseph were used by God to later provide for his family. In this regard, Calvin follows a line of interpretation going back to Chrysostom and Jerome (discussed in more detail in Tolmie 2021:310). Calvin describes in detail how Onesimus's misdeed and disloyalty eventually led to his repentance, to becoming a better slave and even to becoming his master's (spiritual) brother. From these events, Calvin deduces what he refers to as 'a profitable doctrine' (*utilis doctrina*): God sometimes brings God's elect to salvation in ways that are unbelievable and against all expectations. In Onesimus's case, God's hidden providence steered him in his flight towards Paul (CO 52.446.33–447.27).

In his discussion of 1:22 – the other passive in the letter that may be interpreted as a divine passive ('that I may be graciously granted to you') – Calvin again refers to God's actions. In this instance, he does not use the concept 'providence of God' but refers to God's will (*Dei voluntas*). He highlights Paul's hope to be released from prison and points out that even if things did not turn out in the way that Paul had hoped, we should take note of the fact that Paul only hoped for his release on the condition that it would please God (CO 52.448.53–449.5).

Christ

As already pointed out above, Calvin does not refer to Christ as often as he does to God. He refers to Christ four times in the commentary. Two of these have already been discussed above: in his discussion of the expression 'love and faith towards the Lord Jesus and towards all the saints' in 1:5, he notes that having faith in Christ is the only way to attain knowledge about God the Father (CO 52.442.26–33). Furthermore, in discussing the expression *εἰς Χριστόν* in 1:6, Calvin remarks that God's gifts are given to us only if we are 'in Christ' (CO 52.443.38–42). The other two instances have to do with the way in which Paul and believers are described:

The first one relates to Paul's self-description in 1:1 as 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus'. In the discussion of the way in which Luther interprets this expression, it has been noted that he regards it as an attempt by Paul to convey his authority to Philemon. Interestingly, Calvin has a different view: he explicitly notes that it should not be seen as an attempt by Paul to strengthen his authority. According to him, Paul mentions that he is a prisoner because he regards his chains as 'signs or tokens' (*insignia, tesserae*) of his commission. Paul refers to his chains because he intends to plead for forgiveness for a runaway slave (CO 52.441.26–36). In his discussion of 1:8–9, Calvin interprets Paul's self-description ('Paul, an old man [*πρεσβύτες* or *senex*] ... prisoner of Christ Jesus') as a reference to Paul's right to command Philemon, but he focuses almost entirely on the word *πρεσβύτες* or *senex* that he interprets as a reference to Paul's office ('elder'): Paul uses it to refer to the office to which Christ has appointed him (CO 52.444.22–31; cf. 39–42).¹¹

The second instance relates to Paul's description of believers in his comments on 1:13. Calvin interprets this as a request to Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul and appropriates it as follows for his readers: this shows us that we should support 'Christ's martyrs' in all possible ways when they suffer for the gospel. Those who refuse to suffer for the gospel separate themselves from Christ; therefore, we should view believers suffering for the gospel as representing the entire church (CO 52.445.46–446.4).

The Spirit

Calvin refers to the Spirit twice in his commentary, in both instances only briefly. In his discussion of 1:10, he notes that it is only God who can regenerate humans and that this happens through the power of the Spirit (CO 52.445.16–19). Furthermore, in explaining Paul's description of Onesimus as a beloved brother 'in the flesh and in the Lord' in 1:16, Calvin adds a reference to the Spirit: Paul and Philemon had the same relationship to Onesimus 'in the Lord according to the Spirit', but according to the flesh, he formed part of Philemon's family (CO 52.447.1–5).

To summarise: the most striking feature of Calvin's interpretation of Paul's letter for our investigation is the

11. In his discussion of 1:21, Calvin again refers to Paul's apostleship: Onesimus would have been humbled by seeing such an illustrious 'apostle of Christ' pleading his cause (CO 52.448.43–46).

almost constant emphasis on God. Two aspects in particular should be highlighted. Firstly, Calvin regularly introduces theological concepts in describing God's activity. Some of these that are mentioned in the discussion above are 'image of God' (1:10, 14), 'word of God' (1:10), 'God's elect' (1:15), 'providence', 'hidden providence' (1:15) and 'God's will' (1:22). He also uses concepts such as *doctrina* and *regula* when drawing the attention of his readers to some of God's actions. Secondly, if one combines all of Calvin's statements on God in this letter, one ends with a fairly comprehensive picture of God's actions, covering diverse aspects: election, spiritual regeneration, endorsement with spiritual gifts (in Christ), perseverance, God's attitude towards neighbourly love and the gifts that believers bring and, finally, divine providence. Christ and the Spirit receive much less emphasis. The references to the Spirit are very brief; its role is mentioned, but there is not really any discussion of it. The same is true of Calvin's references to Christ: the issues that deserve the most attention are Christ's role in bringing us to God, the description of Paul as 'a prisoner of Christ' and, more generally, the way in which believers should support 'Christ's martyrs'.

Conclusion

It was the aim of this study to illustrate how our presuppositions often influence our interpretation of Scripture. I trust that this overview of the way in which God, Christ and the Spirit are depicted in the commentaries of two theologians who, broadly speaking, followed the same theological tradition, showed how their reception of Paul's letter was influenced by certain views they had about these issues. I am not going to summarise the detailed findings again but will conclude with what seems to be the most striking difference between the two commentaries: Luther's interpretation of the letter is dominated by a Christocentric view, and it is evident that he often read Christ (and sometimes also Satan) in between the lines of the letter where Paul does not explicitly mention him. In Calvin's case, an opposite tendency is noticed: he tended to bring God – and sometimes even certain dogmatic concepts regarding God – into the picture where Paul does not explicitly refer to God. To put it as succinctly as possible: Luther read Paul's letter primarily through Christ; Calvin read it through God.

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