

*the swans are not silent*



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BOOK ONE

THE  
Legacy of  
Sovereign  
Joy

God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of  
Augustine, Luther, and Calvin

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J O H N P I P E R

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*The sum of all our goods,  
and our perfect good,  
is God.*

*We must not fall short of this,  
nor seek anything beyond it;  
the first is dangerous,  
the other impossible.*

ST. AUGUSTINE

MORALS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, VIII, 13



## PREFACE



At the age of seventy-one, four years before he died on August 28, A.D. 430, Aurelius Augustine handed over the administrative duties of the church in Hippo on the northern coast of Africa to his assistant Eraclius. Already, in his own lifetime, Augustine was a giant in the Christian world. At the ceremony, Eraclius stood to preach, as the aged Augustine sat on his bishop's throne behind him. Overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy in Augustine's presence, Eraclius said, "The cricket chirps, the swan is silent."<sup>1</sup>

If only Eraclius could have looked down over sixteen centuries at the enormous influence of Augustine, he would have understood why the series of books beginning with *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* is titled *The Swans Are Not Silent*. For 1,600 years Augustine has not been silent. In the 1500s his voice rose to a compelling crescendo in the ears of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther was an Augustinian monk, and Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other church father. Augustine's influence on the Protestant Reformation was extraordinary. A thousand years could not silence his song of jubilant grace. More than one historian has said, "The Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man"<sup>2</sup>—the view that man is able to triumph over his own bondage to sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), p. 408.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Augustine and Pelagius," in *Tabletalk*, June 1996, p. 11. See the Introduction in this book (note 24) for a similar statement from Benjamin Warfield. See Chapter One on the meaning of Pelagianism.

The swan also sang in the voice of Martin Luther in more than one sense. All over Germany you will find swans on church steeples, and for centuries Luther has been portrayed in works of art with a swan at his feet. Why is this? The reason goes back a century before Luther. John Hus, who died in 1415, a hundred years before Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg door (1517), was a professor and later president of the University of Prague. He was born of peasant stock and preached in the common language instead of Latin. He translated the New Testament into Czech, and he spoke out against abuses in the Catholic Church.

“In 1412 a papal bull was issued against Hus and his followers. Anyone could kill the Czech reformer on sight, and those who gave him food or shelter would suffer the same fate. When three of Hus’ followers spoke publicly against the practice of selling indulgences, they were captured and beheaded.”<sup>3</sup> In December 1414, Hus himself was arrested and kept in prison until March 1415. He was kept in chains and brutally tortured for his views, which anticipated the Reformation by a hundred years.

On July 6, 1415, he was burned at the stake along with his books. One tradition says that in his cell just before his death, Hus wrote, “Today, you are burning a goose [the meaning of “Hus” in Czech]; however, a hundred years from now, you will be able to hear a swan sing, you will not burn it, you will have to listen to him.”<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther boldly saw himself as a fulfillment of this prophecy and wrote in 1531, “John Hus prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia: They will now roast

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<sup>3</sup> Erwin Weber, “Luther with the Swan,” *The Lutheran Journal*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1996, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

a goose (for Hus means a goose), but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing; him they will have to tolerate. And so it shall continue, if it please God.”<sup>5</sup>

And so it has continued. The great voices of grace sing on today. And I count it a great joy to listen and to echo their song in this little book and, God willing, the ones to follow.

Although these chapters on Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were originally given as biographical messages at the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors (which are available on audio cassette, see page 150), there is a reason why I put them together here for a wider audience including laypeople. Their combined message is profoundly relevant in this modern world at the beginning of a new millennium. R. C. Sproul is right that “We need an Augustine or a Luther to speak to us anew lest the light of God’s grace be not only overshadowed but be obliterated in our time.”<sup>6</sup> Yes, and perhaps the best that a cricket can do is to let the swans sing.

Augustine’s song of grace is unlike anything you will read in almost any modern book about grace. The omnipotent power of grace, for Augustine, is the power of “sovereign joy.” This alone delivered him from a lifetime of bondage to sexual appetite and philosophical pride. Discovering that beneath the vaunted powers of human will is a cauldron of desire holding us captive to irrational choices opens the way to see grace as the triumph of “sovereign joy.” Oh, how we need the ancient biblical insight of Augustine to free us from the pleasant slavery that foils the fulfillment of the Great Commandment and the finishing of the Great Commission.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says, An Anthology*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1175.

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Sproul, “Augustine and Pelagius,” in *Tabletalk*, June 1996, p. 52.

I am not sure that Martin Luther and John Calvin saw the conquering grace of “sovereign joy” as clearly as Augustine. But what they saw even more clearly was the supremacy of the Word of God over the church and the utter necessity of sacred study at the spring of truth. Luther found his way into paradise through the gate of New Testament Greek; and Calvin bequeathed to us a 500-year legacy of God-entranced preaching because his eyes were opened to see the divine majesty of the Word. My prayer in writing this book is that, once we see Augustine’s vision of grace as “sovereign joy,” the lessons of Luther’s study will strengthen it by the Word of God, and the lessons of Calvin’s preaching will spread it to the ends of the earth. This is *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*.

Augustine “never wrote what could be called a treatise on prayer.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, his writing flows in and out of prayer. This is because, for him, “the whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire.”<sup>8</sup> And this desire is for God, above all things and in all things. This is the desire I write to awaken and sustain. And therefore I pray with Augustine for myself and for you, the reader,

Turn not away your face from me, that I may find what I seek. Turn not aside in anger from your servant, lest in seeking you I run toward something else. . . . Be my helper. Leave me not, neither despise me, O God my Savior. Scorn not that a mortal should seek the Eternal.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine on Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1986), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

*This will be written for the generation to come;  
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.*

PSALM 102:18



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*One generation shall praise Your works to another,  
And shall declare Your mighty acts.*

PSALM 145:4



## INTRODUCTION

### *Savoring the Sovereignty of Grace in the Lives of Flawed Saints*



#### *The Point of History*

God ordains that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God. “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7, RSV). The God who fashions the hearts of all men (Psalm 33:15) means for their lives to display his truth and his worth. From Phoebe to St. Francis, the divine plan—even spoken of the pagan Pharaoh—holds firm for all: “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Romans 9:17, RSV). From David, the king, to David Brainerd, the missionary, extraordinary and incomplete specimens of godliness and wisdom have kindled the worship of sovereign grace in the hearts of reminiscing saints. “This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (Psalm 102:18).

The history of the world is a field strewn with broken stones, which are sacred altars designed to waken worship in the hearts of those who will take the time to read and remember. “I shall

remember the deeds of the LORD; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God?" (Psalm 77:11-13). The aim of providence in the history of the world is the worship of the people of God. Ten thousand stories of grace and truth are meant to be remembered for the refinement of faith and the sustaining of hope and the guidance of love. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4, RSV). Those who nurture their hope in the history of grace will live their lives to the glory of God. That is the aim of this book.

It is a book about three famous and flawed fathers in the Christian church. Therefore, it is a book about grace, not only because the faithfulness of God triumphs over the flaws of men, but also because this was the very theme of their lives and work. Aurelius Augustine (354-430), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and John Calvin (1509-1564) had this in common: they experienced, and then built their lives and ministries on, the reality of God's omnipotent grace. In this way their common passion for the supremacy of God was preserved from the taint of human competition. Each of them confessed openly that the essence of experiential Christianity is the glorious triumph of grace over the guilty impotence of man.

### *Augustine's Discovery of "Sovereign Joy"*

At first Augustine resisted the triumph of grace as an enemy. But then, in a garden in Milan, Italy, when he was thirty-one, the

power of grace through the truth of God's Word broke fifteen years of bondage to sexual lust and living with a concubine. His resistance was finally overcome by "sovereign joy," the beautiful name he gave to God's grace. "How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose . . . ! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the *sovereign joy*. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation."<sup>1</sup>

Then, in his maturity, and to the day of his death, Augustine fought the battle for grace as a submissive captive to "sovereign joy" against his contemporary and arch-antagonist, the British monk, Pelagius. Nothing shocked Pelagius more than the stark declaration of omnipotent grace in Augustine's prayer, "Command what you wish, but give what you command."<sup>2</sup> Augustine knew that his liberty from lust and his power to live for Christ and his understanding of biblical truth hung on the validity of that prayer. He was painfully aware of the hopelessness of leaning on free will as a help against lust.

Who is not aghast at the sudden crevasses that might open in the life of a dedicated man? When I was writing this, we were told that a man of 84, who had lived a life of continence under religious observance with a pious wife for 25 years, has gone and bought himself a music-girl for his pleasure. . . . If the angels were left to their own free-will, even they might lapse, and the world be filled with "new devils."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 181 (IX, 1), italics added.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), p. 179. The quote is found in Augustine, *Confessions*, X, xxix, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 405, quoting *Contra Julian*, III, x, 22.

Augustine knew that the same would happen to him if God left him to lean on his own free will for faith and purity. The battle for omnipotent grace was not theoretical or academic; it was practical and pressing. At stake was holiness and heaven. Therefore he fought with all his might for the supremacy of grace against the Pelagian exaltation of man's ultimate self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

### *Luther's Pathway into Paradise*

For Martin Luther, the triumph of grace came not in a garden but in a study, and not primarily over lust but over the fear of God's wrath. "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."<sup>5</sup> He might have said, "sovereign joy." But he could not believe it. And the great external obstacle was not a concubine in Milan, Italy, but a biblical text in Wittenberg, Germany. "A single word in [Romans 1:17], 'In [the gospel] the *righteousness of God* is revealed' . . . stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God.'<sup>6</sup> He had been taught that the "righteousness of God" meant the justice "with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner."<sup>7</sup> This was no relief and no gospel. Whereas Augustine "tore [his] hair and hammered [his] forehead with his fists" in hopelessness over bondage to sexual passion,<sup>8</sup> Luther "raged with a fierce and

<sup>4</sup> The book Augustine himself saw as his "most fundamental demolition of Pelagianism" (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 372) is entitled *On the Spirit and the Letter*, in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 182-251.

<sup>5</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1992, orig. 1982), p. 315.

<sup>6</sup> John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 11, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> "I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. . . . I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. . . . I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees," Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 170-171 (VIII, 8).

troubled conscience . . . [and] beat importunately upon Paul at that place [Romans 1:17], most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.”<sup>9</sup>

The breakthrough came in 1518, not, as with Augustine, by the sudden song of a child chanting, “Take it and read,”<sup>10</sup> but by the unrelenting study of the historical-grammatical context of Romans 1:17. This sacred study proved to be a precious means of grace. “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely . . . ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>11</sup> This was the joy that turned the world upside-down.

Justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law, was the triumph of grace in the life of Martin Luther. He did, you might say, stand on his head for joy, and with him all the world was turned upside-down. But the longer he lived, the more he was convinced that there was a deeper issue beneath this doctrine and its conflict with the meritorious features of indulgences<sup>12</sup> and purgatory. In the end, it was not Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgences or Johann Eck’s promotion of purgatory that produced Luther’s most passionate defense of God’s omnipotent grace; it was Desiderius Erasmus’ defense of free will.

Erasmus was to Luther what Pelagius was to Augustine. Martin Luther conceded that Erasmus, more than any other oppo-

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<sup>9</sup> Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter One of this book for the details of this remarkable story.

<sup>11</sup> Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Indulgences were the sale of release from temporal punishment for sin through the payment of money to the Roman Catholic Church—for yourself or another in purgatory.

ment, had realized that the powerlessness of man before God, not the indulgence controversy or purgatory, was the central question of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Luther's book *The Bondage of the Will*, published in 1525, was an answer to Erasmus' book *The Freedom of the Will*. Luther regarded this one book of his—*The Bondage of the Will*—as his “best theological book, and the only one in that class worthy of publication.”<sup>14</sup> This is because at the heart of Luther's theology was a total dependence on the freedom of God's omnipotent grace to rescue powerless man from the bondage of the will. “Man cannot by his own power purify his heart and bring forth godly gifts, such as true repentance for sins, a true, as over against an artificial, fear of God, true faith, sincere love. . . .”<sup>15</sup> Erasmus' exaltation of man's fallen will as free to overcome its own sin and bondage was, in Luther's mind, an assault on the freedom of God's grace and therefore an attack on the very gospel itself, and ultimately on the glory of God. Thus Luther proved himself to be a faithful student of St. Augustine and St. Paul to the very end.

### *Calvin's Encounter with the Divine Majesty of the Word*

For John Calvin, the triumph of God's grace in his own life and theology was the self-authenticating demonstration of the majesty of God in the Word of Scripture. How are we to know that the Bible is the Word of God? Do we lean on the testimony of man—the authority of the church, as in Roman

<sup>13</sup> Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Conrad Bergendoff, ed., *Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 301.

Catholicism? Or are we more immediately dependent on the majesty of God's grace? Sometime in his early twenties, before 1533, at the University of Paris, Calvin's resistance to grace was conquered for the glory of God and for the cause of the Reformation. "God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress."<sup>16</sup> With this "taste" and this "intense desire" the legacy of Sovereign Joy took root in another generation.

The power that "subdued" his mind was the manifestation of the majesty of God. "Our Heavenly Father, revealing *his majesty* [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy."<sup>17</sup> There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate, unassailable, life-giving revelation to our minds of *the majesty of God* that is manifest in the Scriptures themselves. This was his testimony to the omnipotent grace of God in his life: The blind eyes of his spirit were opened, and what he saw immediately, and without a lengthy chain of human reasoning, were two things so interwoven that they would determine the rest of his life: the majesty of God and the Word of God. The Word mediated the majesty, and the majesty vindicated the Word. Henceforth he would be a man utterly devoted to displaying the supremacy of God's glory by the exposition of God's Word.

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<sup>16</sup> Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in two volumes, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I, viii, 13 (emphasis added).

*United with a Passion for the Supremacy of Divine Grace*

In all of this, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were one. Their passion was to display above all things the glory of God through the exaltation of his omnipotent grace. Augustine's entire life was one great "confession" of the glory of God's grace: "O Lord, my Helper and my Redeemer, I shall now tell and confess *to the glory of your name* how you released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world."<sup>18</sup> From the beginning of Luther's discovery of grace, displaying the glory of God was the driving force of his labor. "I recall that at the beginning of my cause Dr. Staupitz, who was then a man of great importance and vicar of the Augustinian Order, said to me: 'It pleases me that the doctrine which you preach ascribes the glory and everything to God alone and nothing to man.'<sup>19</sup> Calvin's course was fixed from his first dispute with Cardinal Sadolet in 1539 when he charged the Cardinal to "set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God.*"<sup>20</sup>

Under Christ, Augustine's influence on Luther and Calvin was second only to the influence of the apostle Paul. Augustine towers over the thousand years between himself and the Reformation, heralding the Sovereign Joy of God's triumphant grace for all generations. Adolf Harnack said that he was the greatest man "between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian Church has possessed."<sup>21</sup> The standard text on theology that

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, p.166 (VIII, 6).

<sup>19</sup> Ewald M. Plass, compiler, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1374.

<sup>20</sup> Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 89 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from "Monasticism and the Confessions of St. Augustine," in Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), p. 306. Although "his direct work as a reformer of Church life was done in a corner, and its results were immediately swept away by the flood of the Vandal invasion . . . it was through his voluminous writings, by which his wider influence was exerted, that he entered both the

Calvin and Luther drank from was *Sentences* by Peter Lombard. Nine-tenths of this book consists of quotations from Augustine, and it was for centuries *the* textbook for theological studies.<sup>22</sup> Luther was an Augustinian monk, and Calvin immersed himself in the writings of Augustine, as we can see from the increased use of Augustine's writings in each new edition of the *Institutes*. "In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* he quotes Augustine 20 times, three years later 113, in 1543 it was 128 times, 141 in 1550 and finally, no less than 342 in 1559."<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, yet paradoxically, one of the most esteemed fathers of the Roman Catholic Church "gave us the Reformation." Benjamin Warfield put it like this: "The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church."<sup>24</sup> In other words, there were tensions within Augustine's

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Church and the world as a revolutionary force, and not merely created an epoch in the history of the Church, but has determined the course of its history in the West up to the present day" (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 306). "Anselm, Aquinas, Petrarch (never without a pocket copy of the *Confessions*), Luther, Bellarmine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard all stand in the shade of his broad oak. His writings were among the favourite books of Wittgenstein. He was the *bête noire* of Nietzsche. His psychological analysis anticipated parts of Freud: he first discovered the existence of the 'sub-conscious.' . . . He was 'the first modern man' in the sense that with him the reader feels himself addressed at a level of extraordinary psychological depth and confronted by a coherent system of thought, large parts of which still make potent claims to attention and respect" (Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], p. 3).

<sup>22</sup> Trapè, Agostino, *Saint Augustine: Man, Pastor, Mystic* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1986), pp. 333-334.

<sup>23</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, pp. 322-323. "This doctrine of grace came from Augustine's hands in its positive outline completely formulated: sinful man depends, for his recovery to good and to God, entirely on the free grace of God; this grace is therefore indispensable, prevenient, irresistible, indefectible; and, being thus the free grace of God, must have lain, in all the details of its conference and working, in the intention of God from all eternity. But, however clearly announced and forcefully commended by him, it required to make its way against great obstacles in the Church. As over against the Pelagians, the indispensableness of grace was quickly established; as over against the Semi-Pelagians, its prevenience was with almost equal rapidity made good. But there advance paused. If the necessity of prevenient grace was thereafter (after the Council of Orange, 529) the established doctrine of the Church, the irresistibility of this prevenient grace was put under the ban, and there remained no place for a complete 'Augustinianism' within the Church. . . . Therefore, when the great revival of religion which we call the Reformation came, seeing that it was, on its theological side, a revival of 'Augustinianism,' as all great revivals of religion must be (for 'Augustinianism' is but the thetical expression of religion in its purity), there was nothing for it but the rending of the Church. And therefore also the greatest peril to the Reformation was and remains the diffused anti-'Augustinianism' in the world."

thought that explain why he could be cited by both Roman Catholics and by Reformers as a champion.

### *God's Grace over the Flaws of Great Saints*

This brings us back to an earlier point. This book, which is about Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, is a book about the glory of God's omnipotent grace, not only because it was the unifying theme of their work, but also because this grace triumphed over the flaws in these men's lives. Augustine's most famous work is called the *Confessions* in large measure because his whole ministry was built on the wonder that God could forgive and use a man who had sold himself to so much sensuality for so long. And now we add to this imperfection the flaws of Augustine's theology suggested by Warfield's comment that his doctrine of grace triumphed over his doctrine of the church. Of course, this will be disputed. But from my perspective he is correct to draw attention to Augustine's weaknesses amid massive strengths.

### *Augustine's Dubious Record on Sex and Sacraments*

For example, it is a perplexing incongruity that Augustine would exalt the free and sovereign grace of God so supremely and yet hold to a view of baptism that makes the act of man so decisive in the miracle of regeneration. Baptismal regeneration and spiritual awakening by the power of the Word of God do not fit together. The way Augustine speaks of baptism seems to go against his entire experience of God's grace, awakening and transforming him through the Word of God in Milan. In the

*Confessions* he mentions a friend who was baptized while unconscious and comes to his senses changed.<sup>25</sup> “In a way that Augustine never claimed to understand, the physical rites of baptism and ordination ‘brand’ a permanent mark on the recipient, quite independent of his conscious qualities.”<sup>26</sup> He regretted not having been baptized as a youth and believed that ritual would have spared him much misery. “It would have been much better if I had been healed at once and if all that I and my family could do had been done to make sure that once my soul had received its salvation, its safety should be left in your keeping, since its salvation had come from you. This would surely have been the better course.”<sup>27</sup> Peter Brown writes that Augustine “had once hoped to understand the rite of infant baptism: ‘Reason will find that out.’ Now he will appeal, not to reason, but to the rooted feelings of the Catholic masses.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, Augustine is not alone in mingling a deep knowledge of grace with defective views and flawed living. Every worthy theologian and every true saint does the same. Every one of them confesses, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). But the famous flawed saints have their flaws exposed and are criticized vigorously for it.

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 222 (IV, iv, 8).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 32 (I, 11).

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 280.

### *Diverse Defects of Different Men*

Martin Luther and John Calvin were seriously flawed saints. The flaws grew in the soil of very powerful—and very different—personalities.

How different the upbringing of the two men—the one, the son of a German miner, singing for his livelihood under the windows of the well-do-do burghers; the other, the son of a French procurator-fiscal, delicately reared and educated with the children of the nobility. How different, too, their temperaments—Luther, hearty, jovial, jocund, sociable, filling his goblet day by day from the Town Council’s wine-cellar; Calvin, lean, austere, retiring, given to fasting and wakefulness. . . . Luther was a man of the people, endowed with passion, poetry, imagination, fire, whereas Calvin was cold, refined, courteous, able to speak to nobles and address crowned heads, and seldom, if ever, needing to retract or even to regret his words.<sup>29</sup>

### *Luther’s Dirty Mouth and Lapse of Love*

But, oh, how many words did Luther regret! This was the downside of a delightfully blunt and open emotional life, filled with humor as well as anger. Heiko Oberman refers to Luther’s “jocular theologizing.”<sup>30</sup> “If I ever have to find myself a wife again, I will hew myself an obedient wife out of stone.”<sup>31</sup> “In domestic affairs I defer to Katie. Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>32</sup> “I have legitimate children, which no papal theologian has.”<sup>33</sup> His

<sup>29</sup> Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters* (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909), pp. 109-110.

<sup>30</sup> Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>32</sup> William J. Peterson, *Martin Luther Had a Wife* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1983), p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 278.

personal experience is always present. “With Luther feelings force their way everywhere. . . . He himself is passionately present, not only teaching life by faith but living faith himself.”<sup>34</sup> This makes him far more interesting and attractive as a person than Calvin, but far more volatile and offensive—depending on what side of the joke you happen to be on. We cannot imagine today (as much as we might like to) a university professor doing theology the way Luther did it. The leading authority on Luther comments, “[Luther] would look in vain for a chair in theology today at Harvard. . . . It is the Erasmian type of ivory-tower academic that has gained international acceptance.”<sup>35</sup>

With all its spice, his language could also move toward crudity and hatefulness. His longtime friend, Melancthon, did not hesitate to mention Luther’s “sharp tongue” and “heated temper” even as he gave his funeral oration.<sup>36</sup> There were also the four-letter words and the foul “bathroom” talk. He confessed from time to time that it was excessive. “Many accused me of proceeding too severely. Severely, that is true, and often too severely; but it was a question of the salvation of all, even my opponents.”<sup>37</sup>

We who are prone to fault him for his severity and mean-spirited language can scarcely imagine what the battle was like in those days, and what it was like to be the target of so many vicious, slanderous, and life-threatening attacks. “He could not say a word that would not be heard and pondered everywhere.”<sup>38</sup> It will be fair to let Luther and one of his balanced admirers put his harshness and his crudeness in perspective. First Luther himself:

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

I own that I am more vehement than I ought to be; but I have to do with men who blaspheme evangelical truth; with human wolves; with those who condemn me unheard, without admonishing, without instructing me; and who utter the most atrocious slanders against myself not only, but the Word of God. Even the most phlegmatic spirit, so circumstanced, might well be moved to speak thunderbolts; much more I who am choleric by nature, and possessed of a temper easily apt to exceed the bounds of moderation.

I cannot, however, but be surprised to learn whence the novel taste arose which daintily calls everything spoken against an adversary abusive and acrimonious. What think ye of Christ? Was he a reviler when he called the Jews an adulterous and perverse generation, a progeny of vipers, hypocrites, children of the devil?

What think you of Paul? Was he abusive when he termed the enemies of the gospel dogs and seducers? Paul who, in the thirteenth chapter of the Acts, inveighs against a false prophet in this manner: “Oh, full of subtlety and all malice, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness.” I pray you, good Spalatin, read me this riddle. *A mind conscious of truth cannot always endure the obstinate and willfully blind enemies of truth.* I see that all persons demand of me moderation, and especially those of my adversaries, who least exhibit it. If I am too warm, I am at least open and frank; in which respect I excel those who always smile, but murder.<sup>39</sup>

It may seem futile to ponder the positive significance of filthy language, but let the reader judge whether “the world’s foremost authority on Luther”<sup>40</sup> helps us grasp a partially redemptive purpose in Luther’s occasionally foul mouth.

<sup>39</sup> W. Carlos Martyn, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (New York: American Tract Society, 1866), pp. 380-381.

<sup>40</sup> The plaudit comes from professor Steven Ozment of Harvard University printed on the back of Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*.

Luther's scatology-permeated language has to be taken seriously as an expression of the painful battle fought body and soul against the Adversary, who threatens both flesh and spirit. . . . The filthy vocabulary of Reformation propaganda aimed at inciting the common man. . . . Luther used a great deal of invective, but there was method in it. . . . Inclination and conviction unite to form a mighty alliance, fashioning a new language of filth which is more than filthy language. Precisely in all its repulsiveness and perversion it verbalizes the unspeakable: the diabolic profanation of God and man. Luther's lifelong barrage of crude words hurled at the opponents of the Gospel is robbed of significance if attributed to bad breeding. When taken seriously, it reveals the task Luther saw before him: to do battle against the greatest slanderer of all times!<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless most will agree that even though the thrust and breakthrough of the Reformation against such massive odds required someone of Luther's forcefulness, a line was often crossed into unwarranted invective and sin. Heiko Oberman is surely right to say, "Where resistance to the Papal State, fanaticism, and Judaism turns into the collective vilification of papists, Anabaptists, and Jews, the fatal point has been reached where the discovery of the Devil's power becomes a liability and a danger."<sup>42</sup> Luther's sometimes malicious anti-Semitism was an inexcusable contradiction of the Gospel he preached. Oberman observes with soberness and depth that Luther aligned himself with the Devil here, and the lesson to be learned is that this is possible for Christians, and to demythologize it is to leave Luther's anti-Semitism in the hands of modern unbelief with no weapon

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

against it.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the devil is real and can trip a great man into graceless behavior, even as he recovers grace from centuries of obscurity.

### *Calvin's Accommodation to Brutal Times*

John Calvin was very different from Luther but just as much a child of his harsh and rugged age. He and Luther never met, but had profound respect for each other. When Luther read Calvin's defense of the Reformation to Cardinal Sadolet in 1539 he said, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men."<sup>44</sup> Calvin returned the respect in the one letter to Luther that we know of, which Luther did not receive. "Would that I could fly to you that I might, even for a few hours, enjoy the happiness of your society; for I would prefer, and it would be far better . . . to converse personally with yourself; but seeing that it is not granted to us on earth, I hope that shortly it will come to pass in the kingdom of God."<sup>45</sup> Knowing their circumstances better than we, and perhaps knowing their own sins better than we, they could pass over each other's flaws more easily in their affections.

It has not been so easy for others. The greatness of the accolades for John Calvin have been matched by the seriousness and severity of the criticisms. In his own day, even his brilliant contemporaries stood in awe of Calvin's grasp of the fullness of Scripture. At the 1541 Conference at Worms, Melancthon expressed that he was overwhelmed at Calvin's learning and called

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>44</sup> Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

him simply “The Theologian.” In modern times, T. H. L. Parker agrees and says, “Augustine and Luther were perhaps his superiors in creative thinking; Aquinas in philosophy; but in systematic theology Calvin stands supreme.”<sup>46</sup> And Benjamin Warfield said, “No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he.”<sup>47</sup> But the times were barbarous, and not even Calvin could escape the evidences of his own sinfulness and the blind spots of his own age.

Life was harsh, even brutal, in the sixteenth century. There was no sewer system or piped water supply or central heating or refrigeration or antibiotics or penicillin or aspirin or surgery for appendicitis or Novocain for tooth extraction or electric lights for studying at night or water heaters or washers or dryers or stoves or ballpoint pens or typewriters or computers. Calvin, like many others in his day, suffered from “almost continuous ill-health.”<sup>48</sup> If life could be miserable physically, it could get even more dangerous socially and more grievous morally. The libertines in Calvin’s church, like their counterparts in first-century Corinth, reveled in treating the “communion of saints” as a warrant for wife-swapping.<sup>49</sup> Calvin’s opposition made him the victim of mob violence and musket fire more than once.

Not only were the times unhealthy, harsh, and immoral, they

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<sup>46</sup> Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 49. Jakobus Arminius, usually considered the historic antagonist of Calvinism, wrote, “[Calvin] excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture, and his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the Library of the Fathers” (Alfred T. Davies, *John Calvin and the Influence of Protestantism on National Life and Character* [London: Henry E. Walter, 1946], p. 24). “He stands out in the history of biblical study as, what Diestel, for example, proclaims him, ‘the creator of genuine exegesis.’ The authority which his comments immediately acquired was immense—they ‘opened the Scriptures’ as the Scriptures never had been opened before. Richard Hooker—‘the judicious Hooker’—remarks that in the controversies of his own time, ‘the sense of Scripture which Calvin alloweth’ was of more weight than if ‘ten thousand Augustines, Jeromes, Chrysostoms, Cyprians were brought forward’” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 9).

<sup>47</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, orig. in English 1577, orig. in French 1562), with Introduction by the publishers, p. viii. For details on Calvin’s miseries see Chapter Three.

<sup>49</sup> Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 75.

were often barbaric as well. This is important to see, because Calvin did not escape the influence of his times. He described in a letter the cruelty common in Geneva. “A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered who, for the space of three years, had [intentionally] spread the plague through the city, by what mischievous device I know not.” The upshot of this was that fifteen women were burned at the stake. “Some men,” Calvin said, “have even been punished more severely; some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners, the conspirators do not cease . . . to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment.”<sup>50</sup>

This kind of capital punishment loomed on the horizon not just for criminals, but for the Reformers themselves. Calvin was driven out of his homeland, France, under threat of death. For the next twenty years he agonized over the martyrs there and corresponded with many of them as they walked faithfully toward the stake. The same fate easily could have befallen Calvin with the slightest turn in providence. “We have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity.”<sup>51</sup>

This atmosphere gave rise to the greatest and the worst achievement of Calvin. The greatest was the writing of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and the worst was his joining in the condemnation of the heretic, Michael Servetus, to burning at the stake in Geneva. The *Institutes* was first published in March 1536, when Calvin was twenty-six years old. It went through five editions and enlargements until it reached its present form in the 1559 edition.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 71.

If this were all Calvin had written—and not forty-eight volumes of other works—it would have established him as the foremost theologian of the Reformation. But the work did not arise for merely academic reasons. We will see in Chapter Three that it arose in tribute and defense of Protestant martyrs in France.<sup>52</sup>

But it was this same cruelty from which he could not disentangle himself. Michael Servetus was a Spaniard, a medical doctor, a lawyer and a theologian. His doctrine of the Trinity was unorthodox—so much so that it shocked both Catholic and Protestant in his day. In 1553 he published his views and was arrested by the Catholics in France. But, alas, he escaped to Geneva. He was arrested there, and Calvin argued the case against him. He was sentenced to death. Calvin called for a swift execution, instead of burning, but he was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553.<sup>53</sup>

This has tarnished Calvin's name so severely that many cannot give his teaching a hearing. But it is not clear that most of us, given that milieu, would not have acted similarly under the circumstances.<sup>54</sup> Melanchthon was the gentle, soft-spoken associate of Martin Luther whom Calvin had met and loved. He wrote to Calvin on the Servetus affair, "I am wholly of your opinion and declare also that your magistrates acted quite justly in condemning the blasphemer to death."<sup>55</sup> Calvin never held civil office in Geneva<sup>56</sup> but exerted all his influence as a pastor. Yet, in this execution, his hands were as stained with Servetus' blood as David's were with Uriah's.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>53</sup> Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 102.

<sup>54</sup> T. H. L. Parker describes some of those circumstances in *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 196.

<sup>56</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 16.

This makes the confessions of Calvin near the end of his life all the more important. On April 25, 1564, a month before his death, he called the magistrates of the city to his room and spoke these words:

With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which [God] has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for *all my crimes and faults*, and blot them from his remembrance. . . . I confess I have failed innumerable times to execute my office properly, and had not He, of His boundless goodness, assisted me, all that zeal had been fleeting and vain. . . . For all these reasons, I testify and declare that I trust to no other security for my salvation than this, and this only, viz., that as God is the Father of mercy, he will show himself such a Father to me, who acknowledge myself to be *a miserable sinner*.<sup>57</sup>

T. H. L. Parker said, “He should never have fought the battle of faith with the world’s weapons.”<sup>58</sup> Most of us today would agree. Whether Calvin came to that conclusion before he died, we don’t know. But what we know is that Calvin knew himself a “miserable sinner” whose only hope in view of “all [his] crimes” was the mercy of God and the blood of Jesus.

### *Why We Need the Flawed Fathers*

So the times were harsh, immoral, and barbarous and had a contaminating effect on everyone, just as we are all contaminated by the evils of our own time. Their blind spots and evils may be dif-

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<sup>57</sup> Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 35 (emphasis added).

<sup>58</sup> Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 103.

ferent from ours. And it may be that the very things they saw clearly are the things we are blind to. It would be naive to say that we never would have done what they did under their circumstances, and thus draw the conclusion that they have nothing to teach us. In fact, we are, no doubt, blind to many of our evils, just as they were blind to many of theirs. The virtues they manifested in those times are probably the very ones that we need in ours. There was in the life and ministry of John Calvin a grand God-centeredness, Bible-allegiance, and iron constancy. Under the banner of God's mercy to miserable sinners, we would do well to listen and learn. And that goes for Martin Luther and St. Augustine as well.

The conviction behind this book is that the glory of God, however dimly, is mirrored in the flawed lives of his faithful servants. God means for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God. This is what I hope will happen through the reading of this book. There are life-giving lessons written by the hand of Divine Providence on every page of history. The great German and the great Frenchman drank from the great African, and God gave the life of the Reformation.

But let us be admonished, finally, from the mouth of Luther that the only original, true, and life-giving spring is the Word of God. Beware of replacing the pure mountain spring of Scripture with the sullied streams of great saints. They are precious, but they are not pure. So we say with Luther,

The writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time, in order that through them we may be led to the

Holy Scriptures. As it is, however, we read them only to be absorbed in them and never come to the Scriptures. We are like men who study the sign-posts and never travel the road. The dear fathers wished by their writing, to lead us to the Scriptures, but we so use them as to be led away from the Scriptures, though the Scriptures alone are our vineyard in which we ought all to work and toil.<sup>59</sup>

I hope it will be plain, by the focus and development of the following three chapters, that this is the design of the book: From the “Sovereign Joy” of grace discovered by Augustine to the “Sacred Study” of Scripture in the life of Luther to the “Divine Majesty of the Word” in the life and preaching of Calvin, the aim is that the glorious Gospel of God’s all-satisfying, omnipotent grace will be savored, studied, and spread for the joy of all peoples—in a never-ending legacy of Sovereign Joy. And so may the Lord come quickly.

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<sup>59</sup> Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther’s Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), p. 13.