A Summary Useful and Superfluous

Summing up what has transpired in the foregoing chapters is no easy matter, not least because an abbreviation of what has been incompletely prosecuted results in something doubly unmoored. A summary that renders its own shortfalls transparent is called for. Thus, with only a partial review of contemporary theology, I have set out a new agenda for academic theology, calling for a heightened reflexivity about academic theological writing. Such writing should structure itself to reflect an ambivalence toward academic theology, seeking to respect our institutional hosts by showing diligence in conforming to academic canons while also being mindful that we are wayfarers; theology is at home, insofar as it can be in this world, not in the academy but among the people of God. To negotiate the potentially contradictory demands of this approach to theological writing, I have made a precipitous entry into philosophies that offer a comprehensive, architectonic theory of difference in general and that are reflexively cognizant of the implications such theories pose for academic writing. I have offered no comprehensive survey of such philosophies, but have contented myself with Hegel and Derrida, who arguably represent opposite extremes. My choice commits me already to both too little and not enough, for analyzing even these two figures entails accountability to a plethora of interpretive options and controversies, but I have tread only lightly into this morass. To cap off my mounting deficits, I have hastily sketched a theory of Christian doctrine, in all its vastness, that conceives it as a friendly partner to this problematizing of academic theological writing, and I sought to instantiate this theory with an highly constructive interpretation of Calvin’s doctrine(s) of justification and sanctification, limiting my sources to the Institutes, and not even in its entirety. So much comprehensiveness, so little comprehension!

On top of it all, I have tried to sum up this sprawling program in one word, and a neologism at that: theography. I take no comfort in inventive language, but only in this: the danger I have opened myself up to, the vulnerabilities under which this program labors, can be accepted and made sense of by the very difference between justification and sanctification on which I have labored. That is, the peril I have exposed myself to can be articulated this way: how can any claim to truth sustain itself and rest content amid the Absolute Standard of academic rigor? How must it give way to a process of negation, purification, and perfection? If this rephrasing enables the problematic of justification and
sanctification to apply to the problematic of this book itself, then, so to speak, I have sinned boldly indeed.

Despite my sins against them, I hope I have made scholarly readers of Calvin more attentive to the logical oddities posed by Calvin’s doctrine(s) of justification and sanctification; it should be clear that I do not see the conclusive explanation for that oddity to lie in ever more refined attempts to read Calvin in his context. Beyond staking myself on this minor contribution, I feel no great compunction to defend my interpretation of Calvin. To be sure, there are simpler ways to make Calvin more-or-less coherent. I am committed to the belief that simpler interpretations can all be broken down by sufficient and dogged deconstructive rigor, which would perforce lead back to the more dialectically complex path I have laid out; admittedly, however, no one would ever arrive at the solution I have propounded only by puzzling over Calvin.

To a broader Christian audience, I have offered an underdeveloped and at times bewildering pathway into the shape of Christian salvation. My specific observations about the character of universal salvation, the nature of faith and selfhood, the relation of sin and grace, the role of works and community each deserve to be presented in a focused and contextualized format that can situate my claims in relation to other relevant theological views. In this text I have deliberately attempted not to solve or rule on these questions so much as show the deconstructive nature of these questions, especially when fielded in theoretical, academic discourse. But I hope to provide more than pure deconstruction; the observation from my soteriology that is most helpful weds constructive guidance and deconstruction: Christian salvation has its foundation in God’s mercy shown in Christ, but how that salvation is lived out need not take a singular form. Indeed, it hardly could. No finite Christian life or community can encompass all of the permutations of justification and sanctification that I have discussed in all their depth. One life or community may excel in the intensity of faith, another in unselfconscious works, another in sorrow for sins, another in building practices of communal righteousness. Even any given historical era can only do justice to some of these depths. So the shape of a life of salvation will and must vary among irreducible possibilities, and Christians must resist the logocentric temptation to see them as mutually exclusive (I Cor. 12). But there is still one body to be descried among the variegated life of salvation, and that body has its unity in justification in Christ. There is a doneness to the deed of salvation that all Christians should acknowledge and conform to. And yet Christians, especially those who call themselves Protestant, again and again fail to comprehend the strange logic of salvation extra nos, and perhaps have never comprehended it. While it is logically conceivable on my terms that Luther’s dogged insistence on justification by faith yield to a life of