CHAPTER NINE

CALVIN: A NEGATIVE BOUNDARY MARKER IN AMERICAN LUTHERAN SELF-IDENTITY, 1871–1934

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INTRODUCTION

John Calvin regarded himself as Luther’s student. If Luther was the fundamental Protestant theologian who bequeathed to Calvin and the rest of the magisterial Reformers the distinction between Law and Gospel as interpretative categories and the Protestant doctrine of justification and then, arguably, with the exception of Augustine, no other post-canonical writer was more influential in the formation of Calvin’s Protestant theology.¹ The structure of the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536) was recognizably Lutheran: the first half of the Institutes concerned the law and the second half concerned the gospel. He also expressed his theological kinship to Luther (and to those Lutherans who would have him) by expressing support for and subscribing the Augsburg Confession (1530) during his stay in Strasbourg.²


² John Calvin, Last Admonition of John Calvin to Joachim Westphal, trans. Henry Beveridge vol. 2, [Selected Works of John Calvin] (1849; repr. Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 355. In 1557, Calvin wrote to Martin Schalling, “Nec vero Augustanam Confessionem repudio, cui pridem volens ac libens subscripsi sicut eam autor ipse interpretatus est.” Corpus Reformatorum, 16.430. Given the context of the sentence there is no obvious reason why the verb “subscripsi” should be taken to mean anything less than that Calvin actually,
This essay, however, is not concerned with Calvin’s view of Luther and the Lutherans but rather with the Lutheran view of Calvin. The early orthodox Lutheran suspicion of Calvin, whom they viewed as a crypto-sacramentarian, was evident in the criticisms leveled by Joachim Westphal (c. 1510–1574) and Tilemann Hesshusius (1527–1588) at Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. That suspicion was profound enough to earn a place in the Formula of Concord (1577). Indeed, the adjective “Calvinist” was a creation of gnesio-Lutheran, anti-Calvin, polemics and “crypto-Calvinist” was a damning epithet aimed at supporters of Philip Melanchthon during the mid-sixteenth century.

At issue is the discrepancy between Calvin’s self-perception (and the way he usually appears to modern Calvin scholarship) as Luther’s faithful, if sometimes dissenting, student and his image among confessional Lutherans in America as a crypto-sacramentarian, rationalist, an illicit and unauthorized corrupter of the faith. This representation of Calvin is frequently invoked in modern, confessionalist, Lutheran literature. For example, the entry s.v., “Calvin, John” in the Lutheran Cyclopedia (1954), says, “Luther’s influence on [Calvin’s] doctrinal formulations is undeniable. There existed, nevertheless, a distinct difference between the two reformers characterized by Calvin’s predominantly formal and legalistic approach to Christianity in contrast to Luther’s warm and evangelical spirit.”

not metaphorically, subscribed the Augsburg Confession. For a slightly different view see Willem Nijenhuis, ‘Calvin and the Augsburg Confession,’ in Ecclesia Reformata. Studies on the Reformation (Leiden, 1972).


6 On the use of the categories of analysis “confessional” and “non-confessional” as opposed to “conservative” and “liberal” see D. G. Hart, The Lost Soul of American Protestantism (Lanham, MD, 2002).

7 Lutheran Cyclopedia, Revised Edition (St Louis, 1975).