

CALVIN AND THE CLASSICAL DEFINITION OF ABSOLUTE POWER

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Can God make a world in which telling lies and hating God are counted as good? This kind of discussion using the idea of the "absolute power" [*potentia absoluta*] of God is strange and absurd to our modern ears. For many of us, we are totally unfamiliar with the above concept and wonder why the medieval schoolmen would devote time to speculate on these kinds of questions. For readers of Calvin's works, we may frequently come across Calvin's serious condemnation of the sophists' use of the term in making God a tyrant. Hence, many scholars of the older generation and a few modern scholars agree that Calvin's condemnation of the idea of "absolute power" is equivalent to his rejection of the nominalist idea of absolute power.¹ Nevertheless, many modern

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1992), III.21.5; Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 243-45; in the Dutch original, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 2, 218f; Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of God," in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 160-62; Emile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les*

Calvin scholars hold that "John Calvin is a Scotist, even though he rejects the nominalist definition of *potentia absoluta*."² Equipping themselves with the revised concepts of medieval nominalism by the revisionists,³ some modern Calvin scholarship disagrees with the traditional assessment. The revisionists inform us that the concept of "absolute power" is used by the medieval schoolmen as a tool to protect the freedom of God in his creation. It is not a speculative tool to allow a concept of a tyrant God like the way Calvin and many traditional interpreters present. The revisionists basically believe that either Calvin misunderstands the

hommes et les chose de son temps, (Lausanne: Bridel & Co., 1899-1917), vol. IV, 119; Henry Bois, *La Philosophie de Calvin* (Paris: Librairie Générale et Protestante, 1919), 21; A. Lecerf, "Le Souverainete de Dieu d'apres le Calvinisme" (La Haye: Internationaal Congres van Gereformeerden, 1935), 26, 29; Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la creation et la Providence dans la predication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978), 112-16, 136-40; Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Pub. House, 1993), 87-91.

² Albrecht Ritschl, "Geschichtliche Studien zur christlichen Lehre von Gott," in *Fahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, vol. 13 (Gotha, 1868), 107; Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 127-29; S. Mark Heim, "The Powers of God: Calvin and Late Medieval Thought," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 19 (Jan 1979): 156-66; Heiko A. Oberman, "Via Antiqua and Via Moderna: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought," in *From Ockham to Wycliff*, eds. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 461-62; idem., *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 252-58; David C. Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18 (Spring 1988): 65-79; idem., *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 39-93; Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found? — Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91-120.

³ Paul Vignaux, "Nominalisme," in *Dictionnaire de theologie Catholique*, vol. 11 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1930), col. 769-75; idem., *Justification et predestination au XIVe siecle: Duns Scot, Pierre d'Auriole, Guillaume d'Occam, Gregoire de Rimini* (Paris, 1934); idem., *Nominalisme au XIVe siecle* (Montreal, 1948); Parthinus Minges, *Ioannes Duns Scoti Doctrina Philosophica et Theologica*, vol. 1 (Quaracchi, 1930), 578-79; Herman Oberman, "Some Note on the Theology of Nominalism with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960): 47-76; idem., *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); William J. Courtenay, "Covenant and Causality in Pierre d'Ailly," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 94-119; idem., "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, eds. Charles Trinkas and Heiko Oberman (Leiden, 1974), 26-59; idem. "Nominalism and Late Medieval Thought: A Bibliographical Essay," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972): 716-34.

nominalist concept⁴ or he rejects it only because of his idea of the primacy of the will of God.⁵ They also emphasize the discontinuity between Calvin and the Reformed orthodoxy in this issue. David C. Steinmetz argues that the later Reformed theology disagrees with Calvin's "harsh judgment."⁶ However, their conclusion is not conclusive because the revisionists' idea of the development of the concept of "absolute power" is seriously challenged.

Some recent research, by Eugenio Randi, Francis Oakley, Leonard A. Kennedy, Steven Ozment, William J. Courtenay, and Gijsbert van den Brink, on the late medieval development and the change of the use of *potentia absoluta* has undermined the conclusion of the revisionists.⁷ They have successfully demonstrated the incompleteness of the revisionist thesis. They show that there is a significant change of the use of *potentia absoluta* in late medieval period. The term, *potentia absoluta*, was used then more and more in a legal sense and with more ridiculous speculations. Using their results I will show in this paper that Calvin is aware of the use of the term in his times in his attack on the term. The conclusions of the revisionists mentioned above are inaccurate. Calvin's condemnation is consistent with his methodological rejection of

⁴ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, 113, 119.

⁵ Case-Winters, *God's Power*, 43.

⁶ Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," 66.

⁷ Eugenio Randi, "A Scotist Way of Distinguishing between God's Absolute and Ordained Power," in *From Ockham to Wycliff*, 43-50; idem., *Il sovrano e l'orologio. Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sulla <potentia absoluta> fra XIII e XIV secolo* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1986); Francis Oakley, "Medieval Theories of Natural Law: William of Ockham and the Significance of the Voluntarist Tradition," *Natural Law Forum* 6 (1961): 65-83; "Pierre d'Ailly and the Absolute Power of God," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 59-73; idem., *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); Leonard A. Kennedy, "Late-Fourteenth-Century Philosophical Scepticism at Oxford," *Vivarium* 23 (1985): 124-51; idem., *Peter of Ailly and the Harvest of Fourteenth-Century Philosophy* (Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); idem., "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," *Vivarium* 27 (1989): 125-52; Steven Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); William J. Courtenay changed his ideas after 1972; idem., "The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, ed. Tamar Rudavsky (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), 243-69; idem., *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: P. Lubrina, 1990); Gijsbert van den Brink, "De absolute en geordineerde macht van God: Opmerkingen bij de ontwikkeling van een onderscheid," *Netherlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 45 (1991): 204-22.

unnecessary theological speculation. In addition, I will also demonstrate the fundamental continuity of Calvin with the late Reformed orthodoxy on this issue by comparing Calvin's teaching with that of the later Reformed theologians.

Late Medieval Development and Change of the Use of *potentia absoluta*

In the early medieval period, the distinction of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* was used to indicate the freedom and the omnipotence of God and the contingency of the universe.⁸ Based on Matthew 3:9, Matthew 26:53, and Augustine's teaching,⁹ the early medieval theologians developed the concept. The issue and the debate are included in the definitions 42 to 44 in the Book One of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the standard theological textbook in the medieval era. In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas provides a classical definition of absolute power in the early medieval period:

[S]o nothing prevents there being something in the divine power which He does not will, and which is not included in the order which He has placed in things. Again, because power is considered as executing, the will as commanding, and the intellect and wisdom as directing; what is attributed to His power considered in itself, God is said to be able to do in accordance with His absolute power. Of such a kind is everything which has the nature of being, was said above. What is, however, attributed to the divine power, according as it carries into execution the command of a just will, God is said to be able to do by His ordinary power. In this manner, *we must say that God can do other things by His absolute power than those He has foreknown and preordained He would do. But it could not happen that He should do anything which He had not foreknown, and had not preordained that he would do, because His actual doing is subject to His foreknowledge and preordination, though His power, which is His nature, is not so.*¹⁰

⁸ To understand the definition in the early Medieval period, please refer Irven Michael Resnick, *Divine Power and Possibility in St. Peter Damian's De Divina Omnipotentia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction Up to Its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 25-114.

⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 7,8 (PL 44, 250-52; CSEL 60, 237) and *Contra Gaudentium* I, 30, 35 (PL 43, 727; CSEL 53, 233).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), vol. I, q.25 a.5 r1. Italics mine. Cf. *De Potentia Dei*, q.1 a.5; *Summa contra Gentiles*, II, c.23-30.

Potentia absoluta means merely the ability of God considered in itself to signify that God can do more than he actually does [*de potentia ordinata*]. Nevertheless, the term was used much more frequently and with much more speculation after the Parisian condemnation in 1277.¹¹ For example, Ockham speculates that God can incarnate by taking the nature of an ass;¹² Peter of Ailly argues, "By his absolute power, God can tell a falsehood to a rational creature, and deceive him, even by Himself immediately and directly."¹³ This kind of speculation gives an image of God which is seriously in conflict with the sense of justice revealed in the Bible and in our conscience. Another important issue is whether the late medieval theologians adopt the canonist idea of tyrant king into the concept of the absolute power of God. Most scholars of the older generation believe that the distinction became a destructive device in late medieval period, beginning probably from Scotus.¹⁴

The older consensus was recently challenged by the revisionists, led by Paul Vignaux, Parthinus Minges, Heiko Oberman, and William Courtenay (Courtenay changed his idea after 1972). The revisionists argue persuasively that the intention of the introduction of the distinction in the medieval debate is to uphold the freedom of God and the contingency of the world.¹⁵ Vignaux points out that the definition is used to emphasize that the established order is a gratuitous gift of God "through which God

¹¹ Cf. Edward Grant, "The Condemnation of 1277, God's Absolute Power and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages," *Viator* 10 (1979): 211-44.

¹² William of Ockham, *Centilogium theologicum* (Lyons, 1495) concl. 7. A.

¹³ Peter of Ailly, *Quaestiones super libros sententiarum* (Strassburg, 1490), I, 12, HH. Quoted in Kennedy, *Peter of Ailly*, 135.

¹⁴ Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random, 1955), 499-519; Carl Feckes, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Gabriel Biel und ihre Stellung innerhalb der nominalistischen Schule* (Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchh., 1925); David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1941); Erwin Iserloh, *Gnade und Eucharistie in der philosophischen Theologie des Wilhelm von Ockham* (Wisebaden: F. Steiner, 1956); Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); idem. *Gregory of Rimini: Tradition and Innovation in Fourteenth Century Thought* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961); idem., *William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

¹⁵ Vignaux, "Nominalisme," 769-75; Minges, *Ioannes Duns Scoti Doctrina Philosophica et Theologica*, vol. 1, 578-79; Oberman, "Some Note on the Theology of Nominalism with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," 47-76. For the history of the development of the revisionists, please refer Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 11-24 and Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," 68-70.

enters a just relation with rational creature."¹⁶ In this way Vignaux defends the legitimate function of the teaching of William Ockham, Peter d'Ailly, and Gabriel Biel and rejects the notion that the order *de potentia absolute* means an arbitrariness of God's will.¹⁷ Oberman follows up Vignaux's thesis and argues for a strong continuity of the definition of the term from early medieval period to late medieval period. The *absoluta potentia* remains only the possibilities that God has. God never utilizes his *absoluta potentia*, and the *potentia ordinata*, the ordained power, is the order God freely established. They "should not be understood as two different ways of divine actions, as God's actions *ad extra* are undivided."¹⁸ Before 1972, Courtenay also supports the idea that *absoluta potentia* does not refer to the arbitrariness of God and has no relation with miracles:

Potentia absoluta and *potentia ordinata* are not, therefore, two ways in which God can act or might act, normally and with the concurrence of nature in the case of the latter and extraordinarily, supernaturally, and miraculously in the case of the former. *Potentia absoluta* referred to the total possibilities *initially* open to God, some of which were realized by creating the established order; the unrealized possibilities are now only hypothetically possible.¹⁹

Most of modern Calvin scholarship, accepting the conclusions of the revisionists, starts with the assumption of the classical understanding as the background in understanding and evaluating Calvin's rejection of the idea of *potentia absoluta*.²⁰ Steinmetz in his article, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," begins with this definition of the term:

To talk about what is possible for God to do is talk about the absolute power of God (*potentia dei absolute*). To focus on the choices and decisions which God has made, is making, or will make (the distinction is in the human mind and not in the utterly simple being of God) is to introduce the subject of the ordained power of God (*potentia dei ordinata*).²¹

Steinmetz seems to phrase the definition in such a way so as to defend the definition from Calvin's criticism. Susan Schreiner follows the

¹⁶ "volunt' toute gratuite par laquelle Dieu entre en relation de justice avec la creature raisonnable." Vignaux, *Justification et predestination au XIVe siecle*, 127ff.

¹⁷ Vignaux, *Justification et predestination au XIVe siecle*, 132.

¹⁸ Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 37.

¹⁹ Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," 39.

²⁰ Cf. Wendel, *Calvin*, 128; Case-Winters, *God's Power*, 42-43; Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 255-56; Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," 65; Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, 118.

²¹ Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," 65.

revisionist theory and Steinmetz's analysis and criticizes Calvin. She concludes that Calvin "misinterprets" the definition and has an "inaccurate" understanding of the medieval definition.²² She argues that the concept does not make God tyrannical:

Revisionist historians of the last several decades have shown that such fears misinterpreted the intention of "nominalist" theology. According to this revised assessment, the nominalist use of distinction between God's absolute and ordained power did not render God capricious, arbitrary, or tyrannical. The idea of God's "absolute power" meant only that God was *ex lex*, free from all claims external to the divine will. The only exceptions to this freedom were that God could not will God's own nonexistence or suspend the law of noncontradiction.²³

With the presupposition of the correctness of the revisionists' judgment on the late medieval use of the term, it is natural for many modern Calvin scholars to draw the conclusion that Calvin does not understand clearly the concept of the term and the rationale behind it. Some may further argue that Calvin misinterprets because he lacks the formal theological training. However, we have to observe that the revisionists' picture is not complete. One of their proponents, William Courtenay, changes his mind.

After being confronted by the research of Oakley, Randi, Kennedy, and others on the development and the change of the use of the term in late medieval period, Courtenay changes his mind in the 1970s. He confesses, "The history of the distinction from 1250 to 1350 was, in fact, far more complex than it appeared in 1972."²⁴ He now argues, "With Scotus the legal, constitutional definition entered theological discussion." This implies that the concept of "absolute power" is no longer only a theological device to argue that God creates the world freely. Courtenay points out the definition made by Scotus in his *Ordinatio*:

In every agent acting intelligently and voluntarily that can act in conformity with an upright or just law but does not have to do so of necessity, one can distinguish between its ordained power and its absolute power. The reason is that either it can act in conformity with some right or just law, and then it is acting according to its ordained power (for it is ordained insofar as it is a principle for doing something in conformity with a right or just law), or *else it can act beyond or against such a law, and in this case its absolute power exceeds its ordained power*. And therefore

²² Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, 113, 119.

²³ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, 118.

²⁴ Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 20.

it is not only in God, but in every free agent that can either act in accord with the dictates of a just law or go beyond or against that law, that one distinguishes between absolute and ordained power; therefore, the *jurists* say that someone can act *de facto*, that is, according to his absolute power, or *de jure*, that is, according to his ordained legal power.²⁵

Using this definition Courtenay and others argue persuasively that Scotus uses an univocal comparison between God and human authority. Both can by absolute power change the established order. Absolute power is no longer restricted as being mere possibilities. It becomes within the realm of the doable. It then represents extraordinary actions of God and those of the kings. Randi comments:

The tendency Peter [of Atarrabia] shows is clearly close to that of d'Ailly, of Biel, of Johannes Mayor, and others: *potentia absoluta* is at least very similar to the actual power of intervention, *miraculose*, on what normally, *secundum communem cursus rerum*, goes on *de potentia ordinata*. And this tendency is without any doubt based on John Duns Scotus's position, as expressed in his Sentences Commentary.²⁶

Stimulated by Oakley and Rundi, Courtenay traces the uses of the term by theologians in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He finds that even though there are some late medieval theologians resistant to the new definition, more and more late medieval theologians classify miracles and extraordinary power, originally placed in the realm of ordained power, in terms of absolute power.²⁷ Courtenay concludes:

We not only find canonist usage among the Scotists, but its traces are visible in Thomist authors, such as Pierre de Palude, in so-called nominalists, such as Robert Holcot, in secular theologians connected with the new physics, such as Richard Kilvington, and prominent Parisian arts masters and theologians, such as Marsilius of Inghen and, to a lesser degree, Pierre d'Ailly.²⁸

Other scholars concur with his judgment. Gijsbert van den Brink argues similarly:

²⁵ Johannes Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d.44, Ad Quaestionem, in *Opera omnia*, ed. C. Balic, vol. 4 (Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950); quoted in *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, trans. Allan Wolter (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 255. Italics mine.

²⁶ Randi, "A Scotist Way of Distinguishing between God's Absolute and Ordained Power," 50. Courtenay, agreeing with Oberman's judgment, has some disagreement with Randi on how close Biel is with the classical definition. Cf. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 180.

²⁷ Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 115-98.

²⁸ Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 180.

It is precisely the combination of *this qualitative shift* of meaning on the one hand and *the quantitative increase* in speculations on what God *de potentia absoluta* could possibly do on the other hand, which *radically changes the spiritual climate* in which the distinction is discussed.²⁹

Kennedy provides more evidence of the growth of the speculation of the term in the fifteenth century theologians.³⁰ For example, he points out that both Garbiel Biel and John Major argue that God can cause us to hate him.³¹ Biel, Major, and Paul Scriptoris agree that God can lie to us and "by His absolute power could falsify anything prophesied."³² On Incarnation, Major and James Almain agree that God could assume an irrational nature, such as ass.³³ Kennedy concludes that before the Reformation many theologians and philosophers have made a lot of extensive speculation. Among them Thomists are more conservative than Nominalists and Scotists.³⁴

Calvin's Understanding of *potentia absoluta* and His Rejection of it

Equipped with this updated understanding of the late medieval usage of the term *absoluta potentia* in the realm of actions and of the extensive and outrageous speculation involved, we may appreciate more why Calvin condemns the use of the term *potentia absoluta*, and why Calvin rejects them so severely.

Calvin talks explicitly about the definition quite frequently in his works: for example, on Genesis 18:13-14, 25:29, Joshua 10:40, Psalms 38:3, Isaiah 23:9, Jeremiah 12:1, Ezekiel 14:9, Romans 9:19, and in *Institutes* III.23.2, and in his sermons in 2 Samuel 20:16-21, Job 5:17-18, 8:1-6, 23:1-7, 23:8-12, 23:13-17, 33:8-14, 34:4-10, 34:33-37, Jeremiah 14:18, 1 Corinthians 10-11, 1 Timothy 2:13-15, and in four of

²⁹ Brink, *Almighty God*, 85. Italics mine.

³⁰ Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 125-52.

³¹ Major says, "*Odium Dei potest esse sine difformitate si illam qualitatem Deus se solo producat extra subiectum.*" Quoted in Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 132.

³² Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 134-36.

³³ Kennedy also points out that Scotus and Ockham teach the same thing. Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 147.

³⁴ Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 147.

his treatises.³⁵ In all these instances, Calvin consistently denounces "the Papist doctors," "the sophists," and "the doctors of Sorbon" for forging a devilish blasphemous concept of absolute or lawless power on God.³⁶ Calvin criticizes them for imposing a tyrannical power on God.

Calvin's understanding of potentia absoluta

In his sermon on Jeremiah 14:18, Calvin provides us his understanding of the papist idea of absolute power: "Therefore we have the papists attribute two powers to God: the ordinary power [*la puissance ordinaire*] is according to equity, but there is an absolute power through he can damn the angels."³⁷ The first power is a righteous power. The second, according to Calvin, means a lawless power which can unreasonably condemn even the angels. Calvin also elaborates his understanding of the idea in his treatise on Providence:

That Sorbonnic dogma, therefore, in the promulgation of the Papal theologians so much pride themselves, "that the power of God is absolute and tyrannical," I utterly abhor. For it would be easier to force away the light of the sun from his heat, or his heat from his fire, than to separate the power of God from His justice. Away, then, with all such monstrous speculations from godly minds, as that God can possibly do more, or otherwise, than He has done, or that He can do anything without the highest order and reason.³⁸

Here Calvin means that the "absolute power" has two meanings. First, God can do more than he ordained to do or do differently from his ordained decree. Second, God can do something in a totally arbitrary manner without regarding justice. When Calvin discusses whether God can heal us other than in the ordained way, he touches on the new definition of *potentia absoluta*. He says, "True it is that if he wished to use an absolute power, he could well do it otherwise: but we speak not now of God's almightiness, we treat only of the means his will is to keep

³⁵ The locations in his treatises are *CO* 8:115, *CO* 8:310, *CO* 9:259, *CO* 9:288; cf. Armand Aime LaVallee, "Calvin's Criticism of Scholastic Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1967), 291; Stauffer, *Dieu, la creation*, 112-16, 136-40. Stauffer provides good lists of quotations of this definition in Calvin's sermons.

³⁶ Calvin sometimes uses the term "absolute power" in a less technical way to indicate God has the sovereign right over us. Cf. *Comm. Is.* 59:16, *Dan.* 4:17.

³⁷ "*Nous voyons donc que les papistes attribuent deux puissances a Dieu, la puissance ordinaire laquelle est selon equite, mais qu'il a une puissance absolue par laquelle il pourroit dampner les anges.*" *SC* 6, 143-44.

³⁸ Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 248.

towards us."³⁹ Here Calvin clearly takes *potentia absoluta* within the realm of miracles.

Hence, it is clear that "absolute power," for Calvin, is a power which is in the realm of action and is a lawless and tyrannical power. This clearly reminds us of the conclusion of Courtenay and Kennedy. Although there is a need of more research on the intensity and nuances of the use of the new definition of *potentia absoluta* in early sixteenth century, we may comfortably believe that the definition provided by Calvin was popular in the Papist schools, especially when we see the similar use of the term to mean miracles in the works of both Martin Luther and John Eck.⁴⁰

Calvin's idea of the primacy of the will of God and the reasons for his rejection of the new definition of potentia absoluta

A central feature in Calvin's discussion on absolute power is that he emphasizes both the primacy of God's will and the idea that God never acts lawlessly. In his discussion on the election of Jacob and the rejection of Esau, Calvin points out that the will of God is "the cause of causes" and God "cannot be called to account." And His judgments are impossible to be mastered by our limited intelligence because "He dwells in inaccessible light, and his judgments were deeper than the lowest abyss."⁴¹ In his discussion of predestination in his *Institutes*, Calvin says:

For God's will is so much by the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found.⁴²

Based on his emphasis on the primacy of God's will, some scholars treat Calvin's idea of the primacy of God's will as a proof of his being deeply influenced by a Scotist or Ockhamist concept of the radical freedom of God. Nevertheless, Brink wisely warns us, "Some scholars find it difficult

³⁹ CO 33:269.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther's commentary on Genesis 19:14 in *Luther's Work*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1961), 274; John Eck, *In primum librum Sententiarum annotatiunculae*, ed. Walter Moore (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), d.42 a.5.

⁴¹ *Comm. Gen.* 25:29.

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.23.2.

to explain Calvin's rejection of the distinction. Especially for those who are inclined to assimilate Calvin's conception of God with the extreme-nominalistic picture of God as an arbitrary tyrant, it continues to be anomaly."⁴³ Even though Calvin upholds that "the will of God is the source and the rule of all righteousness,"⁴⁴ he rejects the Sorbonnic idea of twofold will of God:

For as to that distinction commonly held in the schools concerning the *twofold will* of God, such distinction by no means admitted by us. The sophists of Sorbon prate about an *ordinate will* of God and an *absolute will* of God. But this is a blasphemy deserved abhorred in its sound to all godly ears,... I, however, on the contrary, contend that so far from there being anything *inordinate* in God⁴⁵

The Sorbonnic idea of an "absolute will" of God is to Calvin attributing an "inordinate" will to God. Although Calvin teaches that God's will is the "cause of causes"⁴⁶ and we cannot assess further than what He revealed, he consistently emphasizes that we cannot and should not "impute tyranny to God, as the sophists triflingly allege in speaking of his absolute power."⁴⁷ He maintains:

Nevertheless I do not thus suppose Him to be without law; for although His power is above all laws, still, because his will is the most certain rule of perfect equity, whatever He does must be perfectly right; and therefore He is free from laws, because He is a law to Himself, and to all.⁴⁸

In his sermon on Job 33:8-14, Calvin clearly states out his principle why even the primacy of the will of God does not allow the new definition of *potentia absoluta*:

And it is worthy to be marked well, that whensoever we think of God's mighty power, we must not take it to be a tyrannical power, to say.... *When we speak of his power, or his justice, or his wisdom, or his goodness, we speak of himself: they are things inseparable*, and cannot be severed (that is to say, they cannot be taken away from his Being): for they are so joined together, as the one of them cannot be without the other. Is God mighty? So is he also good. His mightiness defeats not his goodness, nor yet his justice.⁴⁹

⁴³ Brink, *Almighty God*, 88.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 118.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 118; italics mine.

⁴⁶ *Comm. Gen 25:29*.

⁴⁷ *Comm. Gen 25:29*. Italics mine.

⁴⁸ *Comm. Ex. 3:22*.

⁴⁹ *CO 35:59-61*; italics mine.

Calvin emphasizes that although God is free, He is not free in the sense of a tyrant. God will never will anything contrary to God's inseparable just nature. Calvin's famous line is that God "is a law to Himself." His righteous nature is the ground that His power is not lawless. Calvin seems to have an Anselmian concept of God that God have to be the most perfect good. Calvin cannot tolerate any speculation on God's power to do things contrary to the good nature of God. This implies that Calvin does not believe that the standing moral order is only arbitrarily ordained by God and has totally no relationship with God's nature. Moreover, Calvin has a strong sense of the simplicity of God. In his *Institutes*, Calvin says, "For since the essence of God is simple and undivided, and he contains all in himself, without portion and derivation, but in integral perfection."⁵⁰ In his discussion of the abusive use of absolute power in his sermon on Job 8:3, "Will God pervert justice?", he explains why the idea cannot be applied to God:

Here we be put in mind to yield God the honor of being the fountain of all equity and right, and that it is impossible that he should do anything that is not good and rightful. Some can well find in their hearts to grant that God is Almighty, but in the meanwhile they acknowledge him not to be righteous as they ought to do. *For the one of them must not be separated from the other.* We must not imagine that there are things in God which can be divided one from another. True it is that it behooves us to put a difference between the wisdom, and the goodness, and the justice, and the almightiness of God: but yet notwithstanding, *in respect that he is God, all these things must need to be in him at once, and they must be as it were himself or his very being.*⁵¹

Calvin seems to reject any real distinction in God's essence. For him God cannot have an absolute power separated from His wise, good, and just nature. Brink also has a similar observation:

However, when we start from the fact that in Calvin's theology God's power wholly coincides with His will, and that God's will in turn coincides with His goodness, wisdom and righteousness, it becomes clear that Calvin had to discard the late medieval speculations about God's *potentia absoluta* as improper.⁵²

Furthermore, for Calvin, it is also not legitimate and possible for us to speculate about God's absolute power. He teaches:

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.13.22.

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574; reprinted by Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 137b. *CO* 33:371. Italics mine.

⁵² Brink, *Almighty God*, 88.

It is true that this righteousness of God is partly hidden from us, so as we comprehend it not; but yet nevertheless, it is of his mightiness also; and for proof thereof, are we able to measure it by our wit and understanding? It is certain that we cannot.... It is said that his devices are a bottomless pit, and that he dwells in unapproachable light, so as we cannot reach so high as to know what is in him.⁵³

God's will is the cause of all things. To inquire about God's hidden power behind His will is, for Calvin, by definition impossible!

Calvin rejects excessive speculation, especially when speculation disjoins with the Word of God. Calvin rebukes the speculation about whether the Son of God can be incarnate in an irrational nature. Calvin enjoins us to "avoid stupid questions" (Titus 3:9). He comments:

The *madness* of certain persons can riot to such an extent that, while they sought in their absurd way to appear witty, *they raised the question whether the Son of God could have taken upon himself the nature of an ass....* As if Paul, by considering nothing precious of worth knowing "except ... Christ ... crucified" [1 Cor. 2:2], admitted that an ass is the Author of salvation. Therefore he who elsewhere preaches that by his Father's eternal plan Christ was appointed Head to gather all things together [Eph. 1:10, cf. v.22] will never recognize another who has not been entrusted with the task of redemption.⁵⁴

By appealing to the precious value of Christ and the immutability of the eternal decree, Calvin rejects any speculation of another possibility of the Son's incarnation. Here Calvin clearly disagrees with Scotus, Ockham, and Major.

In his criticism of the Papist usage of the term, Calvin also emphasizes the inseparable link between the Word of God and His Power:

Meanwhile, the *word* of the Lord ought to be inseparably joined with his power; for nothing is more preposterous, than to inquire what God *can* do, to the setting aside of his *declared will*. In this way the Papists plunge themselves into a profound labyrinth, when they dispute concerning the absolute power of God. Therefore, unless we are willing to be involved in absurd dotings, it is necessary that the word should precede us like a lamp; so that his power and his will may be conjoined by an inseparable bond.⁵⁵

One principle Calvin upholds tightly is that "we should not speculate more than what the Word of God reveals." In particular, we cannot speculate about the essence of God. Calvin reminds us: "let us use great

⁵³ CO 33:371.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.12.5. Italics mine.

⁵⁵ *Comm. Gen.* 18:13. Italics mine.

caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to the Word of God itself extends."⁵⁶ This is one of the most important hermeneutic principles for Calvin. Calvin emphasizes it again before his discussion of election in his *Institutes*:

I desire only to have them generally admit that we should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, that we may not neglect what he has brought into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other.⁵⁷

When the Bible teaches, we have to learn. When the Bible stops, we have to stop. The revealed will of God is the limit. This rejection of speculation about the hidden power of God is well in line with the "*sola scriptura*" principle of Calvin.

Does Calvin agree with the classic idea of potentia absoluta?

In his *Defence of the Secret Providence of God*, Calvin firmly upholds the Augustinian concept that God can do more than he actually does. He says, "How sure, immutable and all efficacious is the will of God! And also, how many things He can do, and yet not will! But that He wills nothing that He cannot do!"⁵⁸ This statement, together with Calvin's teaching of the immutability of God's eternal decree, points us back to the classical definition of *potentia absoluta*. God can do more than he does, but God will not do more than what he ordains.

In addition, Calvin admits that there is a secret justice of God.⁵⁹ But it is not what the Sophists calls an "absolute justice" that confuses his revealed order.⁶⁰ It is a rather higher and more perfect justice based on God's nature:

For he should have confessed well, God is righteous, and not only his law will serve to bridle me, but also I know there is another higher righteousness, than that is known to us by his will and by the record of good and evil he gives us to rule our life by.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.13.21.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.21.4.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 256.

⁵⁹ Cf. Susan E. Schreiner, "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Church History* 58 (1989): 322-28; idem., *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, 91-120.

⁶⁰ *Comm. Rom.* 9:19.

⁶¹ *CO* 33:504.

It is not only higher, but much higher:

Yea but is that as much to say, as the angels have a righteousness that may fully match and be compared with the righteousness of God. There is as great odds between them, as there is distance between heaven and earth. Although the righteousness of the angels be perfect in respect of creatures: yet is it nothing but smoke when it comes before the infinite majesty of God.⁶²

Nevertheless, this secret and higher righteousness will not be used to judge us. The revealed law is enough to condemn us: "We have not to do with this for the condemning of ourselves: for the law will be enough for that matter, as has been shown already."⁶³ Calvin is consistent and careful that there is no order other than the ordained and revealed order. Calvin clearly rejects any tyrannical judgment frequently discussed by the late medieval theologians.

Calvin has the idea similar to *potentia extraordinaria* but put it the realm of ordained order. He uses it to distinguish God's extraordinary way from God's regular way. Both are under God's eternal decree. On discussing the exception case of Deborah, he says:

Therefore we see in few words, that God is in no wise contrary to himself, in that he makes a law for us to keep, and in that he works extraordinarily of his power, and do things are not compassed, as commonly things use to be.⁶⁴

Calvin also rejects the univocal analogy of a human tyrant with God. In his sermon on Job 23:8-12, Calvin comments:

But Job's fault is, that forasmuch as he perceives not the reason of God's doings, he imagines him to use an *absolute or lawless power* (as they term it) that is to say, that God works at his own pleasure without keeping any order or rule, and that he does that as he likes, like a Prince that will not be ruled by reason, but follow his own liking.⁶⁵

A prince may be tyrannical but not our God. Calvin consistently rejects the concept of a tyrannical God. This is to him a profane devilish blasphemous idea. Hence, we may conclude that Calvin agrees with the basic elements of the classical definition of absolute power. He teaches that God can do more than He actually does. Nevertheless, his hermeneutic principle will not allow him to speculate outside the limit

⁶² CO 33:493.

⁶³ CO 33:494.

⁶⁴ CO 53:221.

⁶⁵ CO 34:344.

of God's revealed will. Moreover, he emphasizes that God's power cannot be separated from His just nature. And he implies that the present moral order is not totally arbitrary and nor completely contingent.

Basic Continuity between Calvin and the Reformed Orthodoxy

David C. Steinmetz comments that the later Reformed theologians disagree with Calvin's "harsh judgment." This is supported by the evidence that they make use of the term *potentia absoluta* in their teaching.⁶⁶ It is true that many Reformed theologians use the term again after Calvin.⁶⁷ For those who use the term, they define it as the early medieval theologians do. When Ames defines it, he is careful to use actual power to qualify *potentia ordinata*: "Thus a certain distinction is present in divine omnipotence whereby there is a division into absolute power [*potentia absoluta*] and ordaining or actual power [*potentia ordinata sive actualis*]." ⁶⁸ He also emphasizes that *potentia absoluta* refers merely to the possibilities of God. He says, "Absolute power is that by which God is able to do all things possible although they may never be done."⁶⁹ Charnock emphasizes that the two terms refer to one and the same power:

This power is divided ordinarily into absolute and ordinate. Absolute, is that power whereby God is able to do that which he will not do, but is possible to be done; ordinate is, that power whereby God doth that which he hath decreed to do, that is, which he hath ordained or appointed to be exercised; which are not distinct powers, but one and the same power. His ordinate power is a part of his absolute.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," 66.

⁶⁷ Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae* II c.29 (Geneva, 1617); William Ames, *Medulla theologiae*, I.6.16-20; William Perkins, *The Workes of that Famous and Worthie Minister of Christ in the University of Cambrige, M. W. Perkins*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1608-31), I, 13, 32 and II, 233-34; Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 12-30; Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Geneva, 1686-1688), loc. III, q.21, a.3-5; cf. James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 3:44.

⁶⁸ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, N. Car.: Labyrinth Press, 1968), I.6.18.

⁶⁹ Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, I.6.19.

⁷⁰ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 12.

Here the definition fits Courtenay's classical definition of *potentia absoluta* that "the unrealized possibilities are now only hypothetically possible."⁷¹ Charnock is very aware of the abuse of the terms in late medieval period (probably still exists in his time). The odd and outrageous speculations of the term documented by Courtenay and Kennedy are listed out by Charnock.⁷² Charnock, similar to Calvin, emphasizes that "this omnipotence is incommunicable to any creature."⁷³ Similar position can be found in Turretin. Turretin also has a long list what *potentia absoluta* cannot include: for example, impossible for God to lie, to sin, nor to die.⁷⁴ Turretin also upholds that the will of God is the cause of all things, and whatever God wills is just and good. But he, similar to Calvin, qualifies it by its link with God's essential goodness:

This is so with respect to us because the fount of justice ought to be sought nowhere else than in the will of God which, as it is most perfectly just in itself, so it is the rule of all rectitude and justice; for the first in every genus is the rule of the rest. But with respect to God, the will cannot always be called the first rule of justice, and consequently whatever God wills is therefore just and good because he wills it.... For in the latter, God's will is regulated, not indeed extrinsically but intrinsically (viz., by his most holy nature).⁷⁵

⁷¹ Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," 39.

⁷² "The object of his absolute power is all things possible; such things that imply not a contradiction, such that are not repugnant in their own nature to be done, and such as are not contrary to the nature and perfections of God to be done. *Those things that are repugnant in their own nature to be done are several, as to make a thing which is past not to be past.* As, for example, the world is created; God could have chose whether he would create the world, and after it is created he hath power to dissolve it; but after it was created, and when it is dissolved, it will be eternally impossible, that which once true, should ever be false:... *Some things are repugnant to the nature and perfections of God; as it is impossible for his nature to die and perish; impossible for him, in regard of truth, to lie and deceive.* But of this hereafter; only at present to understand the object of God's absolute power to be things possible, that is, possible in nature;... so God, by his absolute power, might have prevented the sin of the fallen angels, and so have preserved them in their first habitation. He might, by absolute power, have restrained the devil from tempting of Eve, or restrained her and Adam from swallowing the bait, and joining hands with the temptation. By his absolute power, God might have given the reins to Peter to betray his Master, as well as to deny him; and employed Judas in the same glorious and successful service, wherein he employed Paul. By his absolute power, he might have created the world millions of years before he did create it, and can reduce it into its empty nothing this moment." Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 12-13. Italics mine.

⁷³ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 18.

⁷⁴ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Loc.III, q.21, a.6-25.

⁷⁵ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Loc. III, q.18, a.3.

Turretin upholds the primacy of the will of God by maintaining that the will of God is the rule of justice with respect to us. Yet, Turretin also safeguards the concept by arguing that the will of God is regulated intrinsically by his nature. Calvin and Turretin may present the case with some variation, but they both uphold the primacy of God's will and righteous nature of His will. Hence, we conclude that Steinmetz's comment is not well-grounded. Although the Reformed theologians use the definition again, they know well the problems involved and guard the definition against possible misuses. Their interpretation of the concept is similar to Calvin. They uphold Calvin's idea of primacy of the will and the inseparability of divine will and divine righteousness. Hence, we conclude that there is strong continuity between Calvin and the Reformed orthodoxy in this area, though one prefers not to use the term and the others use it.

Conclusion

This exercise of re-assessing Calvin's idea of a prominent medieval idea reminds us not to disregard too fast the saying of the Reformer and not to judge too soon that the Reformer does not know what he is saying. A clear understanding of the context Calvin facing, of the complexity of the development in medieval theology, and of the meaning expressed by Calvin will help us to understand him better. Calvin rejects not the classical definition of *potentia absoluta*, but the late medieval scandalous speculation on the concept of *potentia absoluta*. There is also a significant difference between Calvin and his antecedents. Calvin is more conservative in speculation. This is not only related with his hermeneutic principle but also with his understanding of the hiddenness of God's essence. Calvin accepts a classical sense of *potentia absoluta* in God. But we should not speculate and should not impose injustice on this concept.

Moreover, this study also reminds us that we should treat the issue of the continuity and discontinuity of Calvin and medieval period more carefully. As there are so many late medieval works that are not translated and many are still not investigated by the scholarship, we cannot conclusively characterize the situations of the late medieval period yet. Before we draw conclusions concerning the ignorance of the Reformers, we must first investigate well the actual contexts in their era. On the one hand, we should not neglect that there is a continuity between Calvin with the whole medieval scholarship, and on the other hand we also

have to consider there are really some significant differences between Calvin and his contemporary schoolmen. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the thesis that there is a strong continuity between Calvin and with Reformed orthodoxy. The difference between them in this case is that Reformed orthodoxy is more comfortable more classical medieval terminology. Maybe in their era, the distorted usage is not as common as in Calvin's time. But their teaching is basically the same! God is a law to Himself and His will is ultimate and just.

ABSTRACT

Older interpreters agree that Calvin's condemnation of the idea of "absolute power" is equivalent to his rejection of the nominalist idea of absolute power. Nevertheless, some modern Calvin scholarship, equipping with the revised concepts on medieval nominalism by the revisionists, disagrees with the traditional assessment. They basically believe that either Calvin misunderstands the nominalist concept. They also emphasize the discontinuity between Calvin and the Reformed orthodoxy in this issue. Yet, some recent scholarship has undermined the conclusion of the revisionists. They show that there is a significant change of the use of *potentia absoluta* in late medieval period. The term has been used then more in legal sense and with more ridiculous speculations. In this paper, the author argues that Calvin rejects not the classical concept of *potentia absoluta*, but the late medieval scandalous speculation on the concept of *potentia absoluta*. Moreover, Calvin does not like the term as used in his times and the speculation involved. While Calvin upholds the primacy of God's will, he also emphasizes that God's power cannot be separated from His just nature. Furthermore, the study supports the thesis that there is a strong continuity between Calvin and the Reformed orthodoxy. The difference of them in this case is that the Reformed orthodoxy is more comfortable with classical medieval terminology, though their teachings are basically the same.

撮 要

老一輩的學者認為加爾文批判「絕對能力」的觀念，就等於否定中世紀唯名論的看法。雖然如此，部分當今研究加爾文的學者卻反對這看法。基於修正派對中世紀唯名論的新了解，他們認為加爾文錯解了唯名論的觀念，他們亦強調加爾文與正統改革宗的差異。但最近有部分研究挑戰修正派的立論，指出在中世紀後期「絕對能力」的用法有很大改變。此用詞帶有法律含義，並附有很多不合宜的猜測。本文作者指出加爾文並非否定傳統「絕對能力」的觀念，而是反對中世紀後期荒唐的猜測。加爾文對其身處時代所理解的「絕對能力」這用詞和其引申的猜測甚為不悅。加爾文在高舉神的旨意的同時，亦強調神的能力不能與祂公義的本質分割。此外，本研究也支持加爾文與正統改革宗的連貫性。他們的分別在於正統改革宗較容易採用傳統中世紀用詞，但二者的教導基本上是一樣的。