

J. Russell Frazier

Calvin's Doctrine of Divine Accommodation and Its Correspondence with the Methodist Triumvirate¹

Abstract:

The doctrine of accommodation is the idea that God has, out of love, accommodated divine revelation to human frailty and sinfulness. This article summarizes the contributions of secondary resources on the doctrine of divine accommodation in John Calvin's thought. These sources provide a paradigm for examining the doctrine of accommodation in the thought of the Methodist triumvirate, i.e., John and Charles Wesley and John William Fletcher. The author emphasizes that the Methodist triumvirate adopted and adapted the doctrine of accommodation and suggests that it provided a theological underpinning for the early Methodists' accommodative practice of ministry.

Keywords: revelation, accommodation, John Calvin, John Wesley, John Fletcher

J. Russell Frazier is a senior lecturer and Dean of the School of Religion and Christian Ministry at Africa Nazarene University. He received, in 2011, the Ph.D. from The University of Manchester, where his research focused on the theology of John William Fletcher (1729-1785). He serves as the production editor for *Transform: A Journal of Biblical, Theological, and Practical Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition*, has published several articles, and a book entitled *True Christianity: The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*.

Introduction

The doctrine of accommodation is the idea that God, given the present condition of humanity,² has adapted the form and content of divine revelation in order to communicate effectively with human beings.³ From a human standpoint, the doctrine of accommodation implies that human beings are incapable of receiving the full revelation of the divine nature due to human finitude and sin, particularly the noetic effects of sin. From the divine standpoint, God, out of love, desires to reveal to created human beings the divine nature, but the nature of humanity dictates a less than a full revelation lest the object of revelation should be overwhelmed by the glory of the divine and fail to comprehend the content of the disclosure.

The Old and New Testaments are replete with accounts and descriptions of divine accommodation to humanity. While the purpose of the current work is not to launch into an analysis of the biblical data on the doctrine of accommodation, a few examples from scripture may serve to enlighten the reader. In Exodus 33, God promises both to reveal and to conceal himself at the same time, saying, “Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (Ex. 33:23, NIV).⁴ In the NT, the Incarnation is the supreme accommodation of God’s revelation to humanity; the Johannine community can testify to this divine revelation: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only...” (Jn. 1:14, NIV). While only two examples have been given, they point to a broader theme within scripture that underscores the limitations of divine revelation and the human comprehension of it; Paul wrote accordingly, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12, NIV).

Given the widespread theme of accommodation within scripture, it is only natural to find the idea of accommodation in the history of Christian thought. This paper will trace the idea in the Early Church Fathers. Then, the article will review the doctrine of accommodation in the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564) based upon the current discussion among historical theologians on the subject. These discussions will provide a framework for an exploration of the doctrine among the Methodist triumvirate, i.e. John (1703-1791) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788) and John Fletcher (1729-1785).

The goals of this paper are several. First, while it will not attempt to establish a direct appropriation of Calvin’s theology by the Methodist triumvirate, it will examine the theologies of the three early Methodist

theologians to determine any correspondence between them and Calvin. Second, while the differences between Calvin and the Methodist triumvirate have frequently been emphasized, this essay will endeavour to establish the deeper theological accord between the founders of these two theological traditions of Protestantism. Third, the paper will investigate not only the theology of the Methodist triumvirate on this particular doctrine, but will also suggest some practical implications of the doctrine.

The Early Church Fathers on Accommodation

As stated previously, the theme of accommodation is found within scripture, and it is only natural to find the idea of accommodation given treatment in the Early Church Fathers. In his book, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment*, Arnold Huijgen reviews the doctrine of accommodation in the early history of Christianity (Huijgen 2011: 57-93). This section of the current paper will summarize his work.⁵

Huijgen concludes that the doctrine of accommodation "is a patristic commonplace; it is used in the East and the West, in the Antiochene and Alexandrian traditions, from the second century to the fifth century" (Huijgen 2011: 89). The theologian of the period that gives the most comprehensive treatment is John Chrysostom (347-407). He has been styled "le docteur de la condescendance."⁶ Chrysostom is representative in the field and provides the most comprehensive treatment of the doctrine among the Early Church Fathers. For this reason, his thought will be summarized here.

Huijgen summarized Chrysostom's thought with five different aspects: "transcendence, hermeneutics, pedagogy, Christology and Paulinism."⁷ Each of these aspects will be given a brief treatment to summarize the doctrine of accommodation.

First, divine transcendence emphasizes the distinction in nature between the infinite God and finite human beings. Chrysostom uses a term to describe the activity of God to bridge the gap between God and humanity; it is *συγκατάβασις* or condescension. He defines the term: "It means that God appears not as He is, but that he shows Himself in a way that the one who beholds Him can bear, because he proportions what He reveals to the weakness (*ἀσθενεία*) of the beholder."⁸ The term condescension was employed by the Early Church Fathers to indicate the divine adaptation to the human condition and is nearly synonymous with the term accommodation.

The second aspect of Chrysostom's doctrine of accommodation deals with hermeneutical issues. Chrysostom employs accommodation as a key to understanding certain biblical passages, particularly anthropomorphic passages of scripture. The passages that attribute some human emotion or characteristic to God are understood not to be an accurate reflection of the divine nature but an accommodated account which must not be interpreted literally.⁹

Huijgen identifies the third aspect of Chrysostom's doctrine of accommodation as the pedagogical aspect. God's dealings with the Jews in the Old Testament were the means of teaching and preparing them for more profound revelations. However, as Huijgen points out, for Chrysostom, "God's pedagogical dealings with His people are not confined to the Old Testament..." (Huijgen 2011: 80). God continues to reveal Himself progressively throughout the NT era leading humanity toward perfection.

The fourth aspect of the doctrine of divine accommodation, as evidenced in the thought of Chrysostom, has to do with Christology. At this point, Huijgen points to the emphasis of Chrysostom on the Incarnation: "...God's accommodation gradually leads humankind to the apogee, the incarnation" (Huijgen 2011: 81). The source of the Incarnation and divine accommodation is the love of God, or as Chrysostom is inclined to say, the philanthropy of God (Huijgen 2011: 81).

Paulinism is how Huijgen designates the last aspect of the doctrine of accommodation in John Chrysostom's thought.¹⁰ The idea is that the Apostle Paul exemplifies the accommodation in his ministry. The aspect that is discussed here is very different from the previous four. The previous four relate to the activity of God, whereas this fifth aspect indicates the activity of human beings; just as God accommodated divine revelation to the human condition, ministers of the Gospel must accommodate the message to their hearers if they would communicate effectively. John Chrysostom writes,

As also Paul descended indeed alone, but ascended with the whole world: not acting a part, for he would not have sought the gain of them that are saved had he been acting. Since the hypocrite seeks men's perdition, and feigns, that he may receive, not that he may give. But the apostle not so: as a physician rather, as a teacher, as a father, the one to the sick, the other to the disciple, the third to the son, condescends for his correction, not for his hurt; so likewise did he. (Chrysostom 1889: 129)

In the above, Chrysostom employs some of the metaphors frequently used in discussing the doctrine of accommodation: physician, teacher, and father. Such metaphors are commonly used in other writings to portray the condescending nature of divine love.

Chrysostom's doctrine of accommodation was much better developed than the other Early Church Fathers. It was more comprehensive and developed. Other Fathers of the Church nuanced the doctrine or applied it differently than did Chrysostom. However, the purpose of this brief overview was to introduce the reader to the language of this particular doctrine.

Calvin's Interpreters and the Doctrine of Accommodation¹¹

One of the earliest treatments of the doctrine of accommodation in Calvin's thought was Edward A. Dowey Jr.'s work in *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*. Dowey's treatment of this doctrine is only a part of a larger project, and his discussion focuses on the connection between the doctrine of accommodation and the doctrine of revelation. Specifically, he deals with two types of accommodation: "(a) the universal and necessary accommodation of the infinite mysteries of God to finite comprehension, which embraces all revelation, and (b) the special, gracious accommodation to human sinfulness, which is connected with the work of redemption" (Downey 1994: 4). The bulk of the remaining work treats the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, which corresponds with the essential (creation) and accidental (sinner) descriptions of humanity.

In an article entitled "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," Ford Lewis Battles addresses the topic of the doctrine of accommodation in Calvin's thought. Calvin's God, according to Battles, views God as a Divine Rhetorician who bridges the gap between himself and humanity. While this seems to be the stress of this particular article, Battles does contribute to the current work in tracing briefly the use of the idea of accommodation in the Early Church Fathers and in depicting some metaphors used in scripture for divine accommodation: God as Father, God as Teacher, and God as Physician (Battles 1977: 4).

Jon Balserek wrote the first lengthy treatment of Calvin's concept of accommodation entitled "*Deus humanitus saepe cum suis agree solet*": *An Analysis of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*.¹² Calvin's concept considers three components: the capacity or *captus* of

humanity, the divine response to humanity's capacity, and the implications of the divine response to Calvin's understanding of God. Calvin depicts the object of the accommodating God or the *captus* of humanity as wholly fallen (*totus homo*) (Balserak 2002: 54). However, humanity is not only fallen, but weak and intractable. God's response to the *captus* of humanity is comparable to human dealings with humans (and that of an immature person); Balserak quotes Calvin saying, God "is often accustomed to dealing with this people as a human being would" (Balserak 2002: 255). In his article entitled "The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's Understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," Balserak asserts that Calvin's God relaxes his principles and nearly discards them "in order that he may have intimate fellowship with them" (Balserak 2000: 184) and later states that God condescends "to the weakness and even the sinfulness of his children" (Balserak 2000: 187). In his summary of Calvin's accommodating God, Balserak states:

...in accommodation God consistently struggles, experiences resistance, and accepts second best in his dealings with his people. The accommodating God pictured here is not the God of all-invincible power who effortlessly brings his perfect will to pass. This God exists in Calvin's thought too. But the accommodating God often betrays markedly different qualities. He is more like the one who looks at a situation, thinks of what he would like to have happen, and then takes into account the various limitations which hinder the realisation of that goal, and, putting his first desire behind him, does what seems most feasible given the circumstances. Often this is far from his desired outcome. Often this involves him (at least to some degree) in acquiescing with sin. Often he hates it. Often he strives against it and loses resigns himself to a situation that seems entirely unsatisfactory but lives with it and anyway. This is what this face of the accommodating God is like...¹³

This depicts, even as Balserak admits, a very different and confusing picture of God. As Balserak points out, ultimately, Calvin leaves his readers with two images of God: "a 'God within the story' (who is, at times, surprisingly human) and a 'God outside of the story' and largely outside of history (who is utterly transcendent)" (Balserak 2002: 246).

In his monograph entitled *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology*, Huijgen holds that Calvin's doctrine of accommodation was not mediated through classical rhetoric:

...Calvin's concept of accommodation has influenced his reception of classical rhetoric more than classical rhetoric has influenced Calvin's concept of accommodation. ... this idea of simplicity is closely related to the concept of accommodation: the gospel is plain and simple, because God chose to reveal Himself by way of accommodation by not speaking His own, lofty language, but employing our mean linguistic expressions. So, the simplicity of the gospel is contingent on divine accommodation. (Huijgen 2011: 110)

Having dismissed the claim of Calvin's reception of classical rhetoric, Huijgen discusses the influence of the Early Church Fathers and Erasmus. As discussed previously, in his review of the literature, he had depicted the five aspects of patristic thought, which finds its fullest expression in the thought of John Chrysostom. In chapter 3, Huijgen addresses the question of Calvin's reception of the patristic idea and Erasmus' influence and concludes that while Erasmus may have influenced Calvin's terminology, the content of Calvin's doctrine of accommodation reflected the influence of the Early Church Fathers and especially Chrysostom. As a result, the five aspects provide the foundations for the discussion in the remaining chapters of Huijgen's work.

The five aspects of the patristic concept of accommodation are "transcendence, hermeneutics, pedagogy, Christology and Paulinism."¹⁴ These five aspects will become the paradigm for interpreting the doctrine of accommodation within the thought of the Methodist triumvirate.

The Methodist Triumvirate on the Idea of Accommodation

The idea of divine accommodation is very much at home in the theological traditions that emphasise God's transcendence. As a result, the doctrine of accommodation is very much at home within the Calvinistic tradition. One might wonder why the writer proposes to search for any correspondence between Calvin's idea of accommodation and the idea of accommodation among the theologies of the Methodist triumvirate. A quick response to the question (but would perhaps need more nuancing) is to say that the Wesleyan tradition is just at home with the idea of the transcendence of God as the Calvinistic tradition. However, before launching into a survey of the doctrine of accommodation in the Methodist triumvirate, the current writer will briefly introduce the three theologians.

John and Charles Wesley were brothers and, in 1738, experienced evangelical conversions. They were intricately involved in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century and in founding and establishing the Methodist movement. John began field preaching, under the influence of George Whitefield, to the colliers in Bristol in 1741. Charles soon joined his brother in the itinerate preaching ministry of the Methodist societies and itinerated until 1756. John was and is recognized as the principal leader of the movement due to his organizational skills; he established and supported a cadre of itinerate preachers, which expanded and supported the growth of the Methodist movement. Charles was warm and personable and was recognized as the hymn writer, writing over 5,000 hymns during his lifetime (Cross 2005: 1739). John William Fletcher, at approximately 20 years of age, migrated from Switzerland to England where he connected with the early Methodists and experienced an evangelical conversion. He was ordained in the Church of England in 1757 and became, in 1760, the vicar of Madeley, where he remained until his death in 1785. Fletcher defended John Wesley in the Calvinist controversy of the 1770s with his *Checks to Antinomianism*. These three men were particularly influential in establishing and defending the distinctive doctrines of early Methodism.

The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley

While it would be advantageous to consider each theologian of the triumvirate separately, it will be necessary to cover them together in some instances. For example, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, as the title suggests, indicates that the work of both John and Charles appear together; George Osborne, the editor of the 13 volumes, has not attempted to separate the two writers if it is indeed possible. As a result, the paper will consider them together.

As noted above, the word *condescend* is one of the categories of the concept of accommodation. In the *Poetical Works*, the word *condescend* is often associated with other Christian graces or attributes of God. The words with which the word *condescend* is associated in the *Poetical Works* include love (or charity), grace, and mercy.¹⁵

In fact, love is most frequently associated with the idea of condescension. The writers identify the motivation for divine accommodation as the love of God. In a versification of Revelation 1:5-6, the authors write:

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Who can worthily commend
 Thy love unsearchable?
 Love which made Thee condescend
 Our curse and death to feel!
 Thou the one eternal God,
 Who didst Thyself our ransom pay,
 Hast with Thy own precious blood
 Wash'd all our sins away.
 (Wesley and Wesley 1872, 13: 220)

Closely related to the idea of the motivation of divine accommodation is the identification of God with human beings. The Wesleys stressed that God accommodated himself to humanity in identifying entirely with them. Oftentimes, this entails the Father/child metaphor and the idea of reciprocity:

Their faith the gracious Father sees,
 And kindly for His children cares;
 He condescends to call them His,
 And suffers them to call Him theirs.
 (Wesley and Wesley 1868, 1: 214)

The idea of accommodation in the Incarnation is evident.

My condescending Lord,
 How hast Thou to earth stoop'd down!
 Sinners vile and self-abhorr'd
 Thou dost for Thy brethren own;
 O the grace on man bestow'd,
 Man is call'd the friend of God!
 (Wesley and Wesley 1869, 5: 185)

In *Hymns on the Four Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, the writers summarize Mark 10:16 when Jesus took the children into his arms. Jesus is depicted as a “condescending Friend” (Wesley and Wesley 11, 1871:32). When Jesus, in John 15:14, calls his disciples his friends, the Wesleys underscore the identification of Christ with his disciples:

Who can the grace explain?
 My God doth condescend
 To call a worm, a man,
 A sinful man His friend!
 (Wesley and Wesley 1871, 12: 26-27)

In another verse, the authors underscore Christ's willingness to condescend to call his disciples into fellowship when in a post resurrection appearance he calls to them, "Come and have breakfast" (John 21:12, NIV).

Christ to His servants condescends,
Invites and treats us as His friends,
Calls us to fellowship with Him
In grace and happiness supreme...
(Wesley and Wesley 1871, 12: 121)

The hymns of the Wesleys underscored the recipients and the goal of divine accommodation. In *Versions and Paraphrases of Select Psalms*, Psalm 68, Part I, the writers summarize Psalm 68. The condition of the recipients of the grace of God is stressed: "servants," "helpless souls," "prisoners," and "rebels." Yet, God condescends to them, "In goodness as in power supreme." The hymn above (as well as others) emphasizes the frailty and sinfulness of the recipients, but God's willingness to accommodate his dealings to compensate for the condition of human beings in order to redeem them.

He every helpless soul befriends;
To all His servants condescends,
In goodness as in power supreme.
(Wesley and Wesley 1870, 8: 149)

On this same theme, Jesus' "love condescends," and he is depicted as "The Shepherd who died His sheep to redeem" (Wesley and Wesley 1869, 5: 115). The accommodation of God descends to the point of self-abasement; the word "stoop" is employed to convey the meaning: "Condescending grace... stoops to ask my love" (Wesley and Wesley 1868, 1: 268). In the supreme paradox of the Christian faith, the Wesleys stressed the spectrum of both the *kenosis* and the *theosis*. S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. affirms the connection between the two: "[Charles] Wesley understood that, as Bishop Kallistos Ware says, 'God's Incarnation opens the way to man's deification.' Wesley emphasized this several times in his *Nativity Hymns* (1745). Stanza 2 of Hymn 14 reads:

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The Creator of all
To repair our sad fall
From his heav'n stoops down,
Lays hold of our nature, and joins to his own."¹⁶

Thus, the accommodation of Christ in the *kenosis* is chronologically prior to the deification (*theosis*) of human beings. In this same vein of thought, Charles Wesley writes of Christ, "Mild he lays his glory by..." which again points to the *kenosis* for the accomplishment of the *theosis*: "that man no more may die" (Kimbrough 2017: 131). The accommodation of Christ in the Incarnation serves the purpose of union with human beings in order to accomplish the saving purpose of God in their behalf.¹⁷

Above, it has been demonstrated that the Wesleys employed a metaphor of the accommodating God as Father. They also emphasize the analogy of a counselor or teacher. In *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Part II, in a section entitled "Unto the Angel of the Church of Laodiceans," Christ condescends to give counsel:

O let us our own works forsake,
 Ourselves and all we have deny,
 Thy condescending counsel take,
 And come to Thee, pure gold to buy.
 (Wesley and Wesley 1869, 2: 360)

Another frequent metaphor in the Early Church Fathers was God as Physician, another accommodation. In *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in "XLIV. The Same. – Hymn 2" in the section "Jesus Christ, The Same Yesterday, Today, and For Ever [Heb. 13:8]," the two poets emphasize the metaphor of a physician which accommodates grace to the sick, needy, and hurting.

(1) Jesus, Thy far-extended fame
 My drooping soul exults to hear:
 Thy name, Thine all-restoring name
 Is music in a sinner's ear.

(2) Drawn by the evangelic sound,
 I follow with the helpless crowd:
 Mercy, they say, with Thee is found,
 And full redemption in Thy blood.

(3) Sinners of old Thou didst receive,
 With comfortable words, and kind,
 Their sorrows cheer, their wants relieve,
 Heal the diseased, and cure the blind:

(4) Whoever then Thine aid implored,
 Sick, or in want, or grief, or pain,
 Thy condescending grace adored,
 Nor ever sought Thy help in vain.

- (5) And art Thou not the Saviour still,
In every place, and age the same?
Hast Thou forgot Thy gracious skill,
Or lost the virtue of Thy name?
- (6) Faith in Thy changeless name I have;
The good, the kind Physician Thou
Art able now our souls to save,
Art willing to restore them now.
- (7) Though seventeen hundred years are past
Since Thou didst in the flesh appear,
Thy tender mercies ever last,
And still Thy healing power is here.
- (8) Wouldst Thou the body's health restore,
And not regard the sin-sick soul?
The sin-sick soul Thou lovest much more,
And surely Thou shalt make it whole.
- (9) The wondrous works in *Jewry* wrought
Thou canst, Thou wilt, on me repeat;
On me, by faith divinely brought
To fall and worship at Thy feet.
- (10) Here will I ever, ever cry,
Jesus, Thy healing power exert,
Balm to my wounded spirit apply,
And bind Thou up my broken heart.
- (11) My sore disease, my desperate sin
To Thee I mournfully confess;
In pardon, Lord, my cure begin,
And perfect it in holiness.
- (12) That token of Thine utmost good
Now, Jesu, now on me bestow,
And purge my conscience with Thy blood,
And wash my nature white as snow.
(Wesley and Wesley 1869, 4: 374-375)

It is evident that the Wesleys have reflected the theology of the Early Church Fathers and Calvin's thought in employing the three metaphors for the accommodating God: God as Father, God as Teacher, and God as Physician.

One of the unique features of the Wesleys lyrical theology is the prayers for God to condescend to indwell believers. In Hymn III of *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* in the section on *Hymns for Whit-Sunday*, the writers pray for the condescension of the Spirit:

(1) ETERNAL Spirit, come
 Into Thy meanest home,
 From Thine high and holy place
 Where Thou dost in glory reign,
 Stoop in condescending grace,
 Stoop to the poor heart of man.

(2) For Thee our hearts we lift,
 And wait the heavenly Gift:
 Giver, Lord, of life Divine,
 To our dying souls appear,
 Grant the grace for which we pine,
 Give Thyself THE COMFORTER.
 (Wesley and Wesley 1869, 4: 167-168)

The writers emphasize the gap between the “Eternal Spirit” and the recipients of the Spirit. The decent emphasized by the word “stoop” is not one of the spatial distances but on the qualitative distinction between the Spirit and the recipients of the Spirit’s indwelling. Words like “Eternal,” “high and holy,” “in glory reign,” “heavenly Gift,” “Giver, Lord, of Life Divine,” and others describe the nature of the Spirit. The nature of humans is contrasted to the nature of the Spirit. “Dying souls,” “poor heart,” and “meanest home” are words which describe the nature of humanity. The hymn emphasizes the descent of the Spirit into the “meanest” home. The term “meanest” indicates the lowest degree of any good quality, lowest in worth or power (Johnson 1822, 2: 115). Here, as in Calvin’s thought, the *corpus* of humanity is accentuated with a radical distinction between the nature of the accommodating God to whom the appeal is made to “Stoop in condescending grace/Stoop to the poor heart of man.” The Wesleys highlighted the transcendence of the God who accommodates himself to human finitude.

Consideration will now be given solely to John Wesley’s concept of accommodation. While Wesley’s God accommodates himself to the weaknesses and the frailties of humanity,¹⁸ one of the primary emphases that one finds in John’s thought is the matter of condescension or accommodation to fallen human beings in order to bring about salvation. In his notes on Exodus 6:6, Wesley holds that the condescending grace of God is demonstrated in the redemption through the Exodus event (Wesley 1765, 1: 215). In his treatise on *Predestination Calmly Considered*, Wesley discusses the many appeals that God makes to human beings to compass their salvation. In very poignant language, Wesley’s God accommodates

himself to humanity to redeem fallen human beings: “He [God] applies sometimes to their understanding, showing them the folly of their sins; sometimes to their affections, tenderly expostulating with them for their ingratitude, and even condescending to ask, “What could I have done for” you (consistent with my eternal purpose, not to force you) “which I have not done?” (Wesley 2013: 291). In his notes on Jeremiah 5:1, Wesley speaks of the idea of divine condescension in regard to the pardon of Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah. God is willing to pardon “if there be but one righteous man found in it.” (Wesley 1765, 3: 2143). In the discussion above on Calvin’s concept of accommodation, Calvin’s God accommodates to human sinfulness whereas Wesley’s God accommodates by relenting from the punishment of sin, provided the conditions are met and doing what can be done provided that it is “consistent with my eternal purpose.”

John Wesley

For John, the concept of accommodation becomes a hermeneutical tool. At times, certain passages of scripture should not be taken literally; the dialogue between God, the angels and Satan in Job 1 is an example. According to John, the account of the dialogue is an example of God condescending “to our shallow capacities, and to express himself, as the *Jews* phrase it, *in the language of the sons of men*. And it is likewise intimated, that the affairs of earth are much the subject of the counsels of the unseen world. That world is dark to us: but we lie open to it” (Wesley 1765, 2: 1521).

Accommodation can also be used as a hermeneutical key in John Wesley’s thought. John’s comments on Malachi 4:5 reveal that while the scripture has a definite application to a given historical context, the passage through an accommodated application may also be applied to the end of the world. John states, “*The great and dreadful day of the Lord*—This literally refers to the times of vengeance upon the *Jews*, from the death of Christ to the final desolation of the city and temple, and by accommodation, to the end of the world.” (Wesley 1765, 3: 617). In his monograph, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, Scott A. Jones distinguishes between Calvin’s and Wesley’s use of the principle of accommodation. Calvin used the principle of accommodation to resolve “the contradictions and inconsistencies within the Bible,” whereas Wesley employed the principle of accommodation to resolve “discrepancies between the worldview of scripture and that of modern science” (Jones 1995: 40). Wesley would

assert that the scripture had been accommodated to the average reader with a non-scientific mind and is prepared "to yield scripture's authority to external authority" (Jones 1995: 40). Wesley made a distinction, however, between accommodating the word of God to the truth discovered in the natural world and accommodating the Word of God to the hearers. The latter is dangerous. In his *Sermon CXXXVI: On Corrupting the Word of God*, Wesley warns against accommodating the Word of God to the hearers: "Let the hearers accommodate themselves to the word; the word is not, in this sense, to be accommodated to the hearers" (Wesley 1987, 4: 250).

Another critical theme arising from this survey is the accommodation of the law. In the introduction to Exodus 21, Wesley states that the laws recorded in Exodus 21 are not accommodated to the human constitution; however, they are beneficial as an explanation of the moral law which still retained its validity for the Christian in Wesley's view (Wesley 1765, 1: 272).

John Fletcher

While the doctrine of accommodation was only nascent in the thought of John and Charles Wesley, John Fletcher, the third member of the Methodist triumvirate, developed a more thoroughgoing doctrine of accommodation. In Fletcher's thought, one finds all of the aspects which are found in the doctrine of accommodation in Chrysostom's thought.

First, Fletcher emphasized divine transcendence, a radical distinction between the Creator and fallen human nature. He affirmed the total depravity of fallen human nature.¹⁹ Sin affected every aspect of human beings, including the mind. The gap between sinful, finite humanity and a holy, infinite God were humanly insurmountable. The love of God was the impulse for intervening; God accommodated himself to the human condition to redeem humanity.

The second aspect of the doctrine of accommodation is the pedagogical aspect. Because of the noetic effects of sin and human limitations, accommodation becomes a series of divine actions which aim at the goal of "full" revelation. God desires to reveal as fully as possible, but only as fully as human beings are capable of receiving. The issue, then, is not the supremacy of divine revelation; God desires to reveal fully and supremely. However, the timing of revelation is significant; revelation is dispensed in apportioned measures and at appropriate times according to the dictates of human capacity to absorb it.

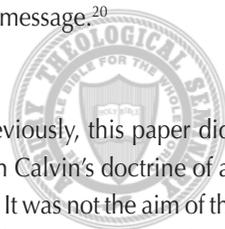
Fletcher's theology of history preserves Christology at the center. "For Fletcher, Christ is not only the apex of the *ordo temporum*, but he is also central to the *ordo salutis* even in the periods of history prior to and following the Christ event" (Frazier 2015: 162). Thus, the third aspect of the patristic doctrine of accommodation is retained.

The fourth aspect of the patristic doctrine of accommodation has to do with hermeneutical issues. Though couched in a different language, Fletcher acknowledges the importance of accommodation or history in the interpretation of some of the OT passages in particular. For him, accommodation is a hermeneutical key. He quotes Milton, "...Milton says somewhere, 'There is a certain scale of duties, a certain hierarchy of upper and lower commands, which for want of studying in right order, all the world is in confusion.'" (Fletcher 1883, 2: 342). Fletcher explained the connection between Milton's citation and the doctrine of dispensations: "What that great man said of the scale of duties and commands, may, with equal propriety, be affirmed of the scale of evangelical truths, and the hierarchy of upper and lower gospel dispensations. For want of studying them in right order, all the church is in confusion" (Frazier 2015: 162).

The doctrine of accommodation is not merely theoretical; it has, in Fletcher's thought, some significant implications for Christian ministry. As God accommodated divine revelation to the fallen human condition to communicate effectively, Christian ministers must accommodate their message (and ministry) to their hearers to communicate effectively the saving news of God in Christ. Fletcher's theology may be summarized as follows: God has, through history, accommodated divine revelation to the limitations of finite human capacity and calls Christian ministers to accommodate themselves to their hearers (congregants) for them to appropriate the Christian message.²⁰

Conclusion

As indicated previously, this paper did not attempt to establish a direct correlation between Calvin's doctrine of accommodation and that of the Methodist triumvirate. It was not the aim of this paper to do so. However, the article has reaffirmed the central role of the doctrine of accommodation in Calvin's thought and underscores how the Methodist triumvirate adopted and adapted the idea of accommodation. The correspondence of the doctrine in Calvin and the early Methodists cautions one against an



overemphasis on an antagonistic relationship between the Calvinistic and the Wesleyan-Arminian branches of Christendom.

While the doctrine was foundational for both systems, some differences should be underscored. While the Wesleys and Fletcher stressed divine transcendence as the backdrop for condescension, they also emphasized that divine condescension to human beings was motivated by the love of God. The Methodist triumvirate stressed, more than Calvin did, divine accommodation as a means of expressing God's love in condescending to human frailties and sinfulness. Love is not only the motivation for the Incarnation; it is the prominent characteristic of the incarnate Christ who befriended frail and sinful human beings. The early Methodist triumvirate stressed the backdrop of divine holiness in their discussions on human sinfulness, underscoring the stark contrast between God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness. However, the objective of divine condescension was the redemption and transformation of human beings in the image of God, accomplished in part through the divine condescension to sin-sick humanity. Thus, divine condescension, particularly in the Incarnation, is the apex of history and is the means to the end of the restoration of the image of God. The Holy Spirit condescends to indwell human beings as the agent of human transformation. Against Calvin's more pessimistic view of history, the Methodist triumvirate held optimistically to the *teleos* of history; that is, God is restoring and perfecting human beings and leading history to its destined end.

From a human standpoint, Christians are to follow the divine example in accommodating, even condescending, to others to participate with God in transforming human lives. They must accommodate the message and ministry to dictates of the limited understanding and cultural contexts for the message to be communicated effectively. At the same time, the goal remains the same: to equip "his people for the works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach the unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12, NIV).

End notes

¹ The title disregards Battles' advice. Battles counseled against using a nominal form of the word *accommodation* in relationship to Calvin's theology, insisting that Calvin always used the verb *accommodare* or *attemperare* when referring to the idea of accommodation (Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity." *Interpretation*. 31(1) (January 1977): 19.

² Battles points out that Calvin uses the term *captus* or *capacity* to speak of the human condition (Battles, 32. See also Balsarak, Jon. "'Deus Humanitus Saepe Cum Suis Agere Solet': An Analysis of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin." Ph. D. thesis, University of Edinburgh (2007): 58ff.

³ Phillipe Theron cites Paul Helm, "God accommodates himself to us: we do not accommodate God to ourselves" (Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK [2006]: 196). Theron adds, "While the latter amounts to idolatry, the former accords with the opening words of Hebrews..." (Phillipe (Flip) Theron, "Chapter 12: Accommodation and Incarnation: A Favourite Concept of Calvin in the Theology of Oepke Noordmans," in *Restoration Through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited*. Studies in Reformed Theology Series. Brill: Leiden, Netherlands [2013]: 199).

⁴ *Holy Bible, New International Version*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011, Exodus 33:23. Hereafter, all scripture references will employ this version of the Bible with an in-text citation, indicating this version as NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ The purpose of my work in *True Christianity* was different than that of Huijgen's. It focused principally on the economy of salvation or the doctrine of dispensations in the history of Christian thought (J. Russell Frazier, *True Christianity: The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*. James Clarke & Co.: Cambridge, UK (2015): 9–34.

⁶ The title was bestowed by Henry Pinard (Theron, "Chapter 12: Accommodation and Incarnation: A Favourite Concept of Calvin in the Theology of Oepke Noordmans," 201).

⁷ Huijgen, 2011:75. Battles also traces the idea of accommodation in the Early Church Fathers (Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity." *Interpretation*. 31[1] [January 1977]: 22-26).

⁸ Quoted from Chrysostom, *Sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu* (Homélie I-IV). Ed. Jean Daniélou and Anne-Marie Malingrey, trans. Robert Flacelière. SC 28bis. Cerf: Paris, France (2000). Huijgen 2011: 76.

⁹ Huijgen, 2011:78. Huijgen cautions against using the idea of accommodation as a lens to interpret scripture: "Obviously, there must be a criterion to judge whether a passage is accommodated to human

understanding; otherwise, the concept of accommodation entails exegetical arbitrariness" (Huijgen 2011: 90).

¹⁰ I wish that Huijgen had used a broader designation for this aspect. Paulinism, of course, limits the application of accommodation to the Apostle Paul. The current writer has not studied sufficiently the doctrine of accommodation in the thought of Chrysostom to know whether or not Chrysostom identified other biblical characters with the application of accommodation. However, a broader term would be more encompassing.

¹¹ Much has been written in recent years on the concept of accommodation in the thought of John Calvin. Some of the research has focused on the idea of accommodation as a hermeneutical key to understanding scripture which lies outside the focus of this paper. Thus, only the most important studies for the purpose of this paper have been considered here.

¹² Balsarak's work has been revised and published under the following title, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht, London: Springer, 2011). The thesis itself discusses Calvin's commentaries, but Balsarak strangely does not develop the idea of accommodation as a hermeneutic.

¹³ Balsarak, 2002: 218. "URL": "https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/18599/BalsarakJ_2007redux.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y", "author": [{"family": "Balsarak", "given": "John"}], "accessed": {"date-parts": [{"2017", 5, 26}]}, "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2002"}]}, "locator": "218", "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} In "The God of Love and Weakness," Balsarak states, "The picture that Calvin paints also involves a God who seems less than omnipotent in practice. In this strand of Calvin's thought, God does not wield his absolute power to bring about the outcomes he desires, but instead labors under and allows his actions to be influenced by many of the same conditions and constraints to which his creatures are subject" (Balsarak, 2000: 195).

¹⁴ Huijgen, 2000: 75. Battles also traces the idea of accommodation in the Early Church Fathers (Battles 1977: 22-26).

¹⁵ Other words include goodness, dignity, counsel, saving power, love, and grace.

¹⁶ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., *Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley*. Cascade Books: Eugene, OR (2017): 89. The current writer is not convinced that the Wesleys posited the idea of the deification of human beings; however, he employs the quote to point to the restoration of the image of God, a theme that was consistently touted in their writings.

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¹⁷ In *Hymns on the Four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles*, the Wesleys speak of the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22. In that context, they write, "He to the conscious soul of man/Still condescends Himself to' unite." (Charles Wesley and John Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and*

Charles Wesley, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 11 [Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office: London, 1871]: 15–16.

¹⁸ cf. 1 Cor. 17:16; Lev. 16:29; Judges 6; Gen. 23; 28:15; 1 Sam. 9:6, 30:7; John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, vols. 1-3. William Pine: Bristol, UK, (1765), en loco.

¹⁹ By total depravity, it is meant that Fletcher held that the Fall had affected every aspect of human beings.

²⁰ Fletcher's pastoral theology is reflected in his *The Portrait of Saint Paul; or, The True Model for Christians and Pastors*. It should be evident from the title that Fletcher's work reflects what Huijgen describes as "Paulinism."

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