

Martin Luther, John Calvin, & Nominalism



What Is Nominalism?

Nominalism is a theory about how we understand categories or universals—things like “redness,” “beauty,” or “dog.”

It says:

“Only individual things exist. General ideas (like 'dog' or 'red') are just names (Latin: nomina) we give to groups of similar things.”



The Basic Problem: Do “Universals” Exist?

Let’s say you see three dogs:

•A German Shepherd



•A Poodle



•A Chihuahua



You might say “these are all dogs.” But what does that really mean?



Is “Dog-ness” a real thing that exists out there somewhere?

- Realists (like Plato) would say yes — “Dog-ness” is a real, abstract form or ideal that all dogs share.
 - Nominalists say no — there is no “Dog-ness.” There are just individual creatures that we group together and label with a word: “dog.”
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Simple Analogy: The Library Example



Imagine a librarian creates a shelf labeled “Fantasy Books.”

- A Realist says: “That label refers to a real, ideal essence of ‘fantasy’ that all those books share.”

- A Nominalist says: “Nope. ‘Fantasy’ is just a name we invented. There’s no magical ‘fantasy-ness’ that exists—just individual books that we grouped together based on similarities.”
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Types of Nominalism

There are different flavors, but here are the main two:

- 1.Strict Nominalism: Universals (like “redness,” “beauty,” “goodness”) do not exist at all — they are just words we use to talk about many similar things.
 - 2.Conceptualism (a softer version): Universals don’t exist outside the mind, but they do exist as mental concepts. We invent them to organize experience.
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Why It Matters (And Why It Was a Big Deal)

Nominalism became a huge deal in Medieval philosophy and theology.

- Realists like Thomas Aquinas thought universals were essential to understanding God, morality, and truth.
- Nominalists like William of Ockham challenged that: they believed you could explain the world without needing abstract universals.

This shift had major effects:

- Undermined medieval metaphysics
 - Helped pave the way for empiricism, science, and individualism
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Real-World Example

Think of the word “nation.”

- Does “the United States” exist as a real, abstract entity?
- Or is it just a name we give to a bunch of people, land, laws, and customs?

A Nominalist would say: it’s just a label we assign to a collection of facts — there is no metaphysical “essence” of the nation.



In Short:

Nominalism says:

Universals are not real things — just names we give to similar individuals.

Both Martin Luther and, to a lesser extent, John Calvin were shaped by Nominalism, especially the kind taught by William of Ockham and the *via moderna* (modern way) in late medieval universities. This influence marked a major shift away from the Scholastic Realism of thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and changed key aspects of Christian theology.

Let's break this down accurately and clearly:



1. Background: Nominalism vs Scholastic Realism

- Scholastic Realism (Aquinas, Albert the Great):
 - Said universals exist (like “goodness,” “human nature”) — either in the mind of God or in things themselves.
 - Believed reason and nature could lead you to God because God created the universe with order and rationality.
 - Nominalism (William of Ockham and the *via moderna*):
 - Claimed only individual things exist; universals are just names or concepts.
 - Emphasized God's absolute will — He is not bound by human logic or ideas of what is “fitting.”
 - Said salvation and morality depend on God's will, not on discovering eternal forms through reason.
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2. Martin Luther's Nominalist Background

- Luther studied under Nominalist teachers, such as Gabriel Biel (a follower of Ockham).

- He rejected much of Scholasticism and the Thomistic synthesis of faith and reason.
- Nominalism emphasized:
 - God's freedom: God is not constrained by our moral logic.
 - Humility before divine will: Human merit cannot earn salvation.
 - No inherent goodness in human acts apart from divine acceptance.



Luther applied this directly to theology:

“What makes a work good is not the work itself, but God’s will to accept it as good.”

Thus, justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) and faith alone (*sola fide*), because no work — even a "good" one — has value unless God chooses to accept it.



3. Key Changes in Theology from Nominalist Influence

Before (Realist/Scholastic)	After (Luther’s Nominalist Shift)
Salvation involves cooperating with God’s grace through works and sacraments	Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone — human works are worthless apart from God’s will
Human nature retains some rational ability to know and seek God	The Fall destroyed all natural ability to seek God — we are totally dependent on divine grace
Theology combines faith + reason (Aquinas)	Theology is based on faith + revelation ; reason is mistrusted in spiritual matters
Moral law reflects eternal, rational order (natural law)	Moral law is God’s command , not a reflection of eternal reason
Sacraments work by their nature (<i>ex opere operato</i>)	Sacraments depend entirely on God’s promise and grace received by faith



4. Calvin’s Position

- John Calvin was more systematic and closer to Augustinian Realism than strict Nominalism.

- However, he shared with Luther the Nominalist view of God's sovereignty and emphasis on God's will.
 - Calvin:
 - Taught that God's decree is the foundation of all reality (including election and reprobation).
 - Rejected Scholastic natural theology.
 - Did not appeal to universals or abstract rational principles — only to God's revealed will in Scripture.
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Summary (Accurate and Succinct)

- Martin Luther was directly shaped by Nominalism through teachers like Gabriel Biel.
 - He rejected the Scholastic Realist tradition (Aquinas), emphasizing that God's will—not reason, merit, or natural law—determines salvation.
 - This shift helped launch the Reformation, recasting Christian theology to focus on:
 - God's freedom and sovereignty
 - Human inability to achieve righteousness
 - Faith and grace as the only grounds for salvation
 - Calvin, while not strictly Nominalist, absorbed many of the same shifts — especially in his emphasis on God's sovereign will and distrust of speculative theology.
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1. Luther on God's Will and Justification (Nominalist Influence)

Luther reflects the Nominalist emphasis on God's absolute will, as opposed to Scholastic notions of merit or participation in grace.

“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.
The love of man comes into being through what is pleasing to it.”
— Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Thesis 28

—> This reflects the Nominalist idea that God’s will defines goodness, rather than recognizing goodness in things by nature. It inverts the Scholastic concept of merit.



2. On the Limits of Reason and Scholasticism

“No one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.”
— Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 43

—> This quote shows Luther’s rejection of Aristotelian realism, which was foundational to Aquinas and Scholastic theology. That rejection stems from his Nominalist training, especially in Ockhamist schools, which distrusted the synthesis of faith and reason.



3. Luther on God’s Hidden Will (Deus Absconditus)

“God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone. We must not inquire into Him, but we must simply believe that He is incomprehensible.”
— The Bondage of the Will (1525)

—> Like Ockham, Luther believed that God’s ultimate decisions (especially about salvation) are beyond human reason. This is Nominalism’s “God of absolute power” (Deus potentia absoluta), rather than Aquinas’ more “rational” God of eternal law.



4. Luther’s Teacher Gabriel Biel on Salvation (Ockhamite Nominalism)

Luther studied Gabriel Biel’s *Expositio Canonis Missae*, where Biel says:

“To one who does what is in him, God will not deny grace.”
— Gabriel Biel, *Sentences*, Book II, Distinction 27

—> This is the Ockhamist view of salvation: if someone tries their best (*facere quod in se est*), God chooses to accept that effort and give grace. Luther first

accepted this idea in his early training — but later rejected it as works-based and uncertain.



5. Luther Rejecting Biel's View Later

Luther came to see the *facere quod in se est* doctrine as false security:

“I was a good monk and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that... I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I... Yet my conscience would not give me certainty.”

— Luther, Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings (1545)

——> This reflects his break from Nominalist salvation doctrine: even if God accepted good effort, you'd never know for sure, because God's will is hidden — so only faith in God's promise through Christ can save you.



Summary of the Influence

Nominalist Teaching

God's will defines good and salvation

Do your best, and God will grant grace

Reason is limited in spiritual matters

God's will is absolute and hidden

Luther's Theological Reframing

God saves by grace alone, not by human works

No one can earn grace; it is a gift through faith

Theology is based on Scripture and faith, not Aristotle

God is hidden in majesty, but revealed in the Cross (theologia crucis)

Let's now turn to John Calvin and explore how he inherited and responded to the Nominalist influence, especially as it came through Luther and the broader Reformation tradition.



1. Did Calvin Study Nominalism?

Calvin was not trained directly in the late-medieval Nominalist schools like Luther was (e.g., under Gabriel Biel), but he was deeply influenced by:

- Augustinian theology (especially on depravity and grace)
- The Lutheran rejection of Scholasticism
- The general Reformation shift away from Aristotelian Realism and toward God's sovereign will

So Calvin absorbed Nominalist themes indirectly, especially through the Reformed interpretation of God's freedom and transcendence.



2. Nominalist Themes in Calvin's Theology



A. God's Absolute Sovereignty and Will

"God's will is the rule of all righteousness... What He wills must be considered just for the very reason that He wills it."

— Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (Book 3, Ch. 23, §2)

—→ This is very Nominalist in tone — like William of Ockham, Calvin holds that justice is not an independent standard above God, but is whatever God decrees.



B. Predestination: Echo of God's Hidden Will

"We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man."

— Institutes, 3.21.5

Calvin emphasizes that:

- Election and reprobation are entirely in God's hands
- There is no cause in the individual that prompts God's choice
- This decree is hidden and mysterious (a very *Deus absconditus* idea)

—→ This parallels Luther's "Bondage of the Will" and echoes the Nominalist distrust of human reasoning in matters of salvation.



C. Rejection of Scholastic "Speculation"

“Curiosity cannot be restrained from roaming, and so it is that many become bold in devising dreams in regard to predestination.”

— Institutes, 3.23.8

—→ Calvin rejects the Scholastic tendency to probe divine mysteries using reason (a key feature of Aquinas’ Realist synthesis). He insists we remain within Scripture and the limits of revelation — a position strongly reinforced by Nominalist skepticism about metaphysical universals.



3. Where Calvin Parts Ways with Nominalism

Calvin is not a full Nominalist, because:

- He holds to a rational, systematic theology that goes beyond Luther’s more existential and dialectical approach.
- He retains a natural law ethic grounded in creation (Rom 1–2), which is closer to Augustine than Ockham.
- He often appeals to God’s nature as good and consistent — not purely arbitrary.

But overall, Calvin reworks Augustinian theology through a Reformation lens that was already shaped by Nominalism’s rejection of Thomistic Realism.



Summary: Calvin’s Use of Nominalist Influence

Theme	Calvin’s Position	Nominalist Influence
God’s Will	Absolute and defines justice	Mirrors Ockham’s voluntarism
Predestination	Based entirely on God’s will, not merit	Echoes Luther’s Nominalist conclusions
Salvation	Entirely by grace, no human contribution	Break from Scholastic merit-based systems
Reason	Valuable in natural things, but limited in divine matters	Distrusts speculative theology
Universals	Not foundational in theology	Rejects Realist metaphysics (like Aquinas)



Closing Thought

While Luther was directly trained in Nominalism, Calvin inherits its theological implications — especially the emphasis on God’s freedom, the primacy of grace, and the denial of human merit — while combining it with Augustinian order, legal clarity, and scriptural rigor.

Here is a detailed and accurate comparison chart of Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, showing how their views differ — especially in the areas of universals, grace, God’s will, salvation, and reason. This will help you trace how Nominalism influenced the Reformation through Luther and Calvin.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Theme	Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)	William of Ockham (1287–1347)	Martin Luther (1483–1546)	John Calvin (1509–1564)
Metaphysics of Universals	Realist: Universals (e.g., goodness, justice) are real — they exist in God and in things	Nominalist: Universals are just names (<i>nomina</i>), not real entities	Accepts Ockham's Nominalism early on; later applies it to challenge Scholastic theology	Inherits Reformation rejection of universal metaphysical reality; cautious about speculative metaphysics
View of God’s Will	Ordered Will: God wills in accord with reason and goodness; God cannot will evil	Absolute Will: God’s will is free and not bound by human reason — what He wills is right	Emphasizes Deus absconditus (the hidden God); God’s will defines what is good and saves whom He chooses	Strong emphasis on sovereign decree ; God’s will predestines things, including election and reprobation
Grace and Merit	Grace perfects human nature; salvation is by grace, but humans cooperate through free will	Grace is a divine favor given freely; merit arises when a person “does what is in him” (<i>facere quod in se est</i>)	Rejects merit completely; salvation by faith alone through grace; good works follow but don’t cause salvation	Agrees with Luther that grace is unearned ; election is unconditional ; works flow from faith but do not cause it
Salvation	Through grace and human cooperation (synergism); sacraments convey grace <i>ex opere operato</i>	God accepts human effort and grants grace as a reward (voluntarist soteriology)	Humans are totally passive in salvation; justification is alien righteousness (Christ’s, not ours)	Salvation is monergistic (God alone acts); humans cannot add anything to grace or resist God if elect
Predestination	Conditional and based on human response	God’s decree	Accepts single decree	Develops double decree

Theme	Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)	William of Ockham (1287–1347)	Martin Luther (1483–1546)	John Calvin (1509–1564)
	foreseen merits or cooperation	is absolute , not based on merit or foresight	predestination : God chooses some to be saved, leaves others in sin	predestination : God elects some, reprobates others all for His glory
Human Nature after the Fall	Damaged but not destroyed; humans retain natural reason and can seek God	Reason can only guide in natural things; it fails in supernatural matters	Human will is bound ; cannot choose good without grace; reason is fallen and unreliable in theology	Human nature is totally depraved ; divine grace is required to even respond to God
Role of Reason in Theology	High role : Faith and reason are harmonious; reason can prove God's existence and natural law	Reason is useful only in practical matters ; cannot comprehend divine mysteries	Faith over reason : Reason is the “devil’s whore” in theological matters	Reason is useful but limited ; theology must be grounded entirely in Scripture
Sacraments	Seven sacraments , infused with grace, real metaphysical effects	Sacraments are signs , not causes; their efficacy depends on God's will	Sacraments are means of grace , but only effective when received in faith	Sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace — not automatic, confirm faith



The Big Picture

Thinker	Worldview	View of God	View of Humanity	View of Salvation
Aquinas	Realist, Scholastic	God is rational, acts according to order and goodness	Wounded but rational	Faith + grace + cooperation
Ockham	Nominalist, Voluntarist	God is absolute will, unconstrained by reason	Fallen and limited	God chooses to accept effort (if sincere)
Luther	Nominalist-turned-Reformer	God is hidden in majesty, revealed in the Cross	Totally corrupt after Fall	By faith alone; works are useless without grace
Calvin	Augustinian-Reformer	God is sovereign ruler; all is decreed	Totally depraved	Grace alone; election by God’s will alone

