The Authority and Doctrine of Scripture in the thought of John Calvin

by Ian S. Palmer

Mr. Palmer, a graduate of the Universities of London and Durham, presents the revision of a paper which he prepared during his student days at King's College, London. He finds that (apart from Dr. R. S. Wallace's book, Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament) *the little that has been written on this subject in recent years tends to be rather less than fair to Calvin, and hopes that this article will help to redress the balance.*

I

CALVIN'S *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and his Commentaries were built like stairs. The *Institutes* in their first edition in 1536 provided a summary of Christian doctrine as Calvin understood it. During the following twenty-three years his study of the Scriptures and the writing of his commentaries was to provide justification for his doctrine and the detailed knowledge which refined and modified the successive editions of the *Institutes.* His commentaries surpass those of Origen and Irenaeus, and even those of Luther; whilst his digest of Christian doctrine in the *Institutes* was to do as much for Protestantism as the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas had done for Roman Catholicism.

Standing in the tradition of sixteenth-century humanism, Calvin was familiar with its methods and rigor of study before he became a Christian. That he knew the "humanist" methods of argument and exegesis can be seen from his commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* which was published in 1532 and which provides a foretaste of the principles he was to use in his later commentaries upon Scripture. He had a respect for the tradition of the Greek and Latin Fathers, but this was by no means blind committal to their pronouncements and judgments. In accordance with the general opinions of the humanists he insisted that, in order to understand the Bible correctly, it must be read in its original tongues, and grammatical rules and usage must be observed.[1] This extensive knowledge and strict adherence to these principles is shown in the "Argument" which prefaces his commentary on Hebrews (1549).

[1] G. Rupp, "The Bible in the Age of Reformation", in *The Church's Use of the Bible,* ed. D. E. Nineham (SPCK, London, 1963), p. 74.

> Some think the author to have been Paul, others Luke, others Barnabas, and others Clement, as Jerome relates; yet Eusebius, in his sixth book of his Church History, mentions only Luke and Clement. I well know that at the time of Chrysostom it was everywhere classed by the Greeks among the Pauline Epistles; but the Latins thought otherwise, even those who were nearest the times of the Apostles.

He then goes on to deduce through style, content and church practice that Paul could not have been the author, though he does not, unlike Luther who designated Apollos, attempt to speculate upon the actual author. Even having pursued his argument so far, he is not content to let it rest, for he then continues by criticizing the notion that it has been translated from the Hebrew by Luke or someone else into Greek. "This conjecture can easily be refuted: to pass by other places quoted from Scripture, on the supposition that the Epistle was written in Hebrew, there would have been no allusion to the word 'Testament' on which the writer dwells so much . . . for διαθήκη has two meanings in Greek, while *berîth* in Hebrew means only covenant. . . ."[2]

His erudition can be seen in the galaxy of ancient writers from whom he quotes: Ambrose, Anselm, Augustine (G. Rupp says over 4,000 times[3]), Bernard, Chrysostom, Pope Gregory, Hilary, Irenaeus, Jerome, Origen, Tertullian, to name but a few Christian writers. In addition, he was well read in the secular field and is acquainted with the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Homer, Horace, Josephus, Ovid, Plato, Pliny and Plutarch amongst others. All this knowledge is made subservient to the task of explaining the message of the Bible. Just as the Humanists used their techniques to dig out the wisdom of past ages, so Calvin used the same methods to discover "the oracles of God".[4] Thus in his commentary on Psalm 8 he can set aside determining the precise meaning of *gittîth* in the title for "the principal thing to be attended to is what the psalm itself contains, and what is the design of it".[5]

1. *The Word of God*

It is the fact that the content of this psalm, and indeed the whole Bible, is the Word of God, God's revelation of Himself to man, which is so important to Calvin. The whole of Scripture has one aim in view, and that is to reveal God. It is quite true that Calvin asserts that God can be known through His creation (albeit imperfectly and only through faith) but it is only in Scripture that God is fully

2 *Hebrews*, translated by John Owen (Eerdmans, 1949), p. xxvii.
3 G. Rupp, art. cit., p. 83.
4 *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. J. Haroutunian and L. P. Smith (S.C.M. Library of Christian Classics, London, 1958), p. 31.
5 *Psalms*, vol. 1, p. 93.

and clearly revealed. It is God's manifestation in Scripture which prevents us aimlessly wandering up and down a labyrinth in search of some doubtful deity. He uses a delightful metaphor to illustrate this point:

> For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are hardly able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in the minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly.[6]

To bring clarity to God's revelation is the purpose of both the Old and New Testaments. Their unity lies in the fact that both bear witness to Christ, not in the sense that Luther made this point, which is that they should bear witness to Christ if they are to be truly Scripture, but for Calvin it was a matter of principle that Scripture does form a common witness to Christ, for He is the heart and substance of the whole Bible.

2. *Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*

Calvin's assertion is that both the Old and New Covenants are founded upon the free mercy of God and the mediation of Christ.[7] These two points provide for Calvin the answer to what has always been a problem for Christians, namely, the relationship of the old dispensation to the coming of Christ. God, through Moses, bears witness to Christ in order that he might call all men to Him. This idea is amply illustrated in his commentary on John 5: 38, 39, though it is by no means the only example that we could have taken. "God did not speak through Moses and the prophets for nothing. His purpose in speaking to Moses was that he might call everyone to Christ. Therefore, it is clear that those who repudiate Christ are no disciples of Moses."[8] (See also his commentary on Acts 7: 38.) Unlike some of Calvin's successors in the Reformed tradition, it is by no means a rash and unsubstantiated assumption that the Old Testament bears witness to Christ. The doctrine behind this stems from his view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture, but he is willing to defend it on rational grounds. An example of this can be found in his commentary on Psalm 8: 5 where Calvin accepts that the primary reference is to man being made a little lower than the angels, but then goes on to argue the propriety of the secondary reference to Christ and his death which is made in Hebrews 2.[9] Those who confine their study of Calvin's view of Scripture to his *Institutes* find themselves deceived by the apparently facile way in

6 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. H. Beveridge (London, 1962), 1.6.1.
7 *Ibid.*, 2.10.4.
8 *Commentaries*, p. 104.
9 *Psalms*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1949), p. 103.

which Calvin sees Christ in the Old Testament, for they fail to note the justification for this found in his commentaries.[10]

Calvin is careful to ensure that his readers are in no doubt about the nature of the unity of Scripture. That the Old Testament anticipates Christ, and the New Testament bears witness to him is no rash assumption. It provides the theme of his *Preface to Olivetan's New Testament*[11] which was written as early as 1534, but retained its importance to him until his death. In the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559) we can see the clearest development of this doctrine.

> Let this then be a sure axiom: that there is no word of God to which place should be given in the Church save that which is contained, first in the Law and the Prophets, and secondly in the writings of the Apostles.... Hence we infer that nothing else was permitted to the Apostles than was formerly permitted to the prophets—namely to expound the ancient Scriptures, and to show that the things there delivered are fulfilled in Christ."[12]

3. *The Inspiration of Scripture*

We have already seen how Calvin believed Scripture to have a single subject: Christ. He was also convinced that it has a unique origin: God (he seems to use "God" and "Holy Spirit" interchangeably in this context). The writers of Scripture were divinely inspired, or wrote under the influence of the Holy Spirit, so that he can say: "The Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance."[13] In no single place does he go into detail about the method of inspiration, but rather from time to time he throws out occasional hints about it. He speaks of the apostles as the "sure and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit (*certi et authentici Spiritus Sancti amanuenses*); and, therefore, their writings are to be regarded as the oracles of God."[14] This short, enigmatic statement is expanded in his commentary on 2 Tim. 3: 16 where he writes: "This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they uttered only what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures let him, first of all, lay down this settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated

10 In this respect the essay on Calvin in R. E. Davies, *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers*, (London, 1946), is inadequate, for he ignores the Commentaries and thus gives a distorted picture of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture.

11 *Commentaries*, pp. 58 f.: "Epistle to the Faithful Showing that Christ Is the End of the Law."

12 *Institutes* 4.8.8 (but see also 4.8.6-8).

13 *Ibid.*, 1.7.1.

14 *Ibid.*, 4.8.9.

by the Holy Spirit."[15] After looking at this evidence (actually he does not present it as forcefully as I have), Davies says that we are forced to conclude "that Calvin committed himself to a completely verbal and mechanical theory of inspiration."[16] However, I would contest such a conclusion on what I believe are very good grounds.

When Calvin asserts that the author of the Bible is God, he does so because the subject of it is Jesus Christ—the Word of God—and therefore, God must be its author. When he speaks of the Bible in a way which suggests its literal inerrancy it is the consequence of the divine authorship and not the basis of it.[17] He does not postulate a series of miracles to eliminate every potential mistake in the text of Scripture; rather, as we noted earlier, he is acutely aware of textual difficulties and the influence of human circumstances. Throughout his commentaries he remarks on the styles of the individual authors. Isaiah was a great poet, and Ezekiel indulged in wearisome repetitions. But this is only logical from his position, for whilst he echoes Peter's words (see commentary on 2 Peter 1: 20) in saying that the prophets were "moved" by the Holy Spirit, he goes out of his way to emphasize, against the Anabaptists, that they were not "bereft of their own minds."[18] In complete harmony with this he recognizes that as well as God's desire for the "higher benefit of the Church" there were human factors which caused John's Gospel to be written.[19] Calvin was a very great Biblical scholar, unable to neglect either the human or the divine attributes of Scripture. It is the divine author of Scripture who is consistent and cannot change his likeness, not the human writers. The words of F. Wendel neatly summarize this distinction: "Though the content of Scripture is divine, inasmuch as it is the word of God, the form in which that content is clothed is not therefore divine."[20]

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture that Calvin puts forward does not end here, for unlike many expositions of this subject he has a most important corollary; this is that the divine inspiration is witnessed to in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This inner witness of the Holy Spirit, as he calls it, convinces us of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. He writes: "our conviction of the truth of Scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgments and reasons; namely the secret testimony of the Spirit."[21] It should be noted that the establish-

15 *Timothy* (Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 248 f.
16 R. E. Davies, op. cit., p. 114.
17 P. L. Lehmann, "The Reformers' Use of the Bible," *Theology Today*, vol. 133 (October, 1946), pp. 338 f.
18 *Commentaries*, p. 89.
19 P. L. Lehmann, art. cit., p. 339.
20 F. Wendel, *Calvin* (Fontana, 1965), p. 160.
21 *Institutes* 1.7.4.

ment of an argument through human reason is not rejected, but rather Calvin insists that it is not sufficient. The authority demonstrated by reason is clear to all, but

> these [arguments] . . . cannot of themselves produce a firm faith in Scripture until our heavenly Father manifest his presence in it, and thereby secure implicit reverence for it. Then only, therefore, does Scripture suffice to give a saving knowledge of God when its certainty is founded on the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. . . . It is foolish to attempt to prove to infidels that Scripture is the Word of God. This cannot be known except by faith.[22]

It is constantly asserted in his commentaries that this test of faith, the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, is superior to all tests of reason. Only those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can perceive the divine authorship of Scripture, though it should be evident to all men.[23] Such a knowledge of the presence of the Spirit of God is essential if one is to understand the Word of God, for without it the meaning of Scripture will elude the exegete. "The Spirit who has spoken by the prophets is his own interpreter."[24] The person who tries to discover the meaning of Scripture without the aid of the Holy Spirit is like one who tests for gold with no knowledge of the subject.[25]

The implications of this are twofold. First, in asserting the double activity of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture and the inward testimony in the elect, Calvin removed the basis for the Anabaptist assertion of the present work of the Holy Spirit over against the written word of the Bible. Both sources are imperative for salvation and an understanding of the ways of God. Secondly, anything lifeless and mechanical has been excluded from his doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. God meets men individually through the interpretation of his Word in the heart of man. A parallel might be drawn with Calvin's instructions concerning a minister's exegesis of the Word. He must be able to understand the Scripture in a scholarly way, and at the same time be able to apply it to the needs and difficulties of life.[26] So each Christian has the written testimony of the Spirit before him, and the life-giving witness of the Spirit within him.

4. *The Authority of Scripture*

As we move to a consideration of the nature and scope of the authority of Scripture for Calvin, it will be seen that it develops naturally from his views concerning its inspiration. The authority of the Word of God is derived from its source: the inspiration of

22 *Ibid.*, 1.8.13.
23 *Commentaries*, p. 85, on 2 Tim. 3: 16.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 88, on 1 John 4: 1.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
26 R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, p. 120.

the Spirit of God, and the one to whom it bears witness: Jesus Christ. "Our faith is not established until we have a perfect conviction that God is its author. Hence, the highest proof of Scripture is uniformly taken from the character of him whose word it is."[27]

The extent of the internal authority of Scripture includes the whole Bible, but at the same time he is aware that the Word of God does not speak authoritatively on all subjects. On this issue Calvin walks the tight-rope between the Lutheran position (where Scripture is authoritative when bearing witness to Jesus Christ) and the extreme Puritan stand, which declared that Scripture must govern everything, and anything which is not prescribed is not lawful. Calvin recognized different types of authority in Scripture, and that there were some areas which came outside its direct authority. For this authority is not to be equated with relevance. Because a statement in Scripture was not immediately comprehensible or applicable to a doctrine or situation, its authority was not diminished. The interpretation of the Scripture through the indwelling Holy Spirit applied the Word of God to a contemporary situation.

II

Moving from the internal to the external authority of Scripture, it seems appropriate to discuss it under three main headings: in the individual, in the Church, and in the State.

1. *The Individual*

Submission to the teaching of Scripture is imperative for each Christian. He writes: "If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture."[28] This obedience to the Word of God provides the only way in which a man can attain full and perfect faith. However, Scripture bears its authority not only with respect to doctrine, but also to conduct. That a person's moral behaviour should be directed by Scripture is suggested in several places, but is succinctly summarized in Calvin's commentary on Psalm 119: 9-11. "The only sure protection (from the vices of the world) is, to regulate ourselves according to God's word. . . . Our true safeguard, then, lies not in a slender knowledge of God's law, or in a careless perusal of it, but in hiding it deeply in our hearts. Here we are reminded, that however men may be convinced of their own wisdom, they are yet destitute of all right judgment, except as far as they have God as their teacher."[29]

27 *Institutes* 1.7.4.
28 *Ibid.*, 1.6.2.
29 *Psalms*, vol. 4 (Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 407 f.

2. *The Church*

Calvin's distinction between the invisible Church, as the Church really is before God including saints both alive and departed, and the visible Church, comprising all members of churches alive and scattered throughout the world, is well known. Even a cursory glance at the visible Church assured him that it was not perfect and contained hypocrites; nevertheless the signs of a visible church are two-fold: that the Word of God is sincerely preached and heard; and that the sacraments are duly administered according to the command of Christ.[30] Within the visible Church Calvin sees the Word of God not only as its sole proclamation, but also as its rule. Like the individual the Church must always place itself under the teaching of Scripture, for it was the Scripture, or rather the teaching of the apostles, which formed the Church.[31] In submitting itself to the doctrines of Scripture the Church is doing no more than allowing itself to be directed by Christ. Ministers have been given to the Church, and it is their duty to search out the true meaning of the Word and apply it to the situation within the Church. It is to prevent men in the Church teaching their own ideas as dogmas that Calvin makes this stipulation, and also to rule out the heresy that the presence of the Spirit excludes the necessity for Scripture. The first provision is aimed against Rome (which he does not consider to be a Church), and the second against the influence of the Anabaptists. Though ceremonies and matters of Church government are to be directed by Scripture, he recognizes that there can be a certain amount of latitude in these. He appreciates that Scripture is far from specific on matters relating to rites and rituals, and his designation of offices within the Church retains a certain looseness of terminology. Such a hesitancy is to be expected of the man in Geneva who brought about a complete revolution in Church system.

3. *The State*

In line with other of the Reformers, Calvin believed that the civil government is established by God, and necessary to allow the Church to proclaim the faith within the context of law and order. The magistrates, invested with divine authority, were to protect the Church and her worship, so that to attempt to depose them would not only be anarchy, but would be acting against God. It is just at this point that a tension is introduced, for if the magistrates commend one to act contrary to the ordinances of God, they are not to be obeyed; but even so, Calvin rejected active rebellion.[32]

30 *Institutes* 4.1.7-9.
31 *Ibid.*, 1.7.2.
32 *Ibid.*, 4.20.1,4,32.

The individual Christian and the Church are under the authority of Scripture; the state is directly responsible to God. The Church and state operate in different spheres. The Church is concerned with the soul or the "inner man", and the state with justice and external behaviour. To a certain extent these functions overlap, but Calvin sought to retain the difference in the authority of the Church and the State. The Church was brought into existence by the Scriptures, and was governed by them. The State derived its authority from God, but this was confirmed by the Scriptures. The magistrates "have not ascended unto this estate by their own strength, but are placed there by the hand of God", and this "right of government is ordained of God for the health of mankind."[33] The important thing about the authority of Scripture and its relation to the state is that Calvin uses the word of God to bolster the position of the magistrate as the representative of the ordered state in which the Church and individual Christian can worship freely.

III

The Text and Canon of Scripture[34]

We have already noted that Calvin's deep interest in the text of Scripture was a direct result of his humanist heritage. His commentaries are provided with his own Latin translation from the original tongues of the Bible. In fact, though, he always lectured from the Greek and Hebrew texts, and in his detailed and careful exegesis he always used these.

Throughout this discussion of the doctrine of Scripture held by Calvin we have used it synonymously with "Bible". Such usage is perfectly correct, for it neatly shows the extent of Calvin's canon of Scripture. Some suggest that since he wrote no commentary on the second and third epistles of John, and made only a few references to the Apocalypse with no commentary on it either, these books should be regarded as falling outside Calvin's canon. Such an argument is untenable for he makes no apparent distinction between these and any other New Testament book. That he, like many other learned theologians, finds the doctrine of the last things difficult can be seen in the fact that he deals with the doctrine in only one chapter of the *Institutes*. However, this difficulty does not imply that he lowered the status of these books. Of crucial importance to this question is the way he ejected Castellion from his position as Principal of his school in Geneva because he spoke against the canonical status of the book of Canticles and disputed whether or not Christ really descended into hell. Calvin took his stand upon the canonicity

33 *Romans* (Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 364 f.

34 For a detailed study of the subject of this section see T. H. L. Parker *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (S.C.M., London, 1971).

of the Song of Songs and raised the issue into a dispute about the authority and extent of Scripture as received.

To put the matter in this manner raises the most perplexing question as to how Calvin arrives at the idea of a fixed canon. As one would expect he rejects the notion that the canon has been given its authority by the Church; rather the reverse is true, and the Church is founded upon the authority of Scripture, as we pointed out above. Neither does Calvin use the Lutheran criterion for assessing the authority of Scripture, namely, its witness to Christ (however, it must be noted that Luther never expurgated any book from the canon[35]). On the other hand, Calvin does speak of reverence for the Church because it contains, and has contained, those who are enlightened by the Spirit of God. It is for this reason that Calvin can accept the Church's acknowledgement of the authority of these books: "When the Church receives Scripture, and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but, acknowledging it as the truth of God, she, as in duty bound, shows her reverence by unhesitating assent."[36]

IV

A short study such as this is bound to present Calvin's view of Scripture in an inadequate and one-sided manner. By reason of its nature it concentrates upon one aspect of Calvin's immensely far-reaching understanding of Christian doctrine. Throughout this study I have attempted to draw in other parts of this doctrine, but it is necessary to conclude with a short outline of it. Pre-eminent in Calvin's doctrine is the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of all men. The direct result of this is that man is unable to aspire to reach God, so if he is to be known, God must reveal himself. This God has done, in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures bear the inspired witness both in the Old and New Testaments. Thus, Scripture is not autonomous; it does not stand along-side other ancient books; it is the place where, through the life-giving work of the Spirit, Christians encounter their Lord.

Durham

35 See Luther's *Preface to James and Jude.*
36 *Institutes* 1.6.2; also 1.6.2-3.