

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIAN: CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

*Revelation in the Old and New Testaments*

RONALD S. WALLACE

Though God has given a clear revelation of himself in the created world around us, and we all have an 'instinct' for religion which should lead us towards him, our natural perversity of mind makes it impossible for us to profit from natural religion until we have first of all come to know him through Holy Scripture.

Early in history, therefore, God chose a nation – a people of God who were to be drawn even then into a 'close and intimate relation to himself' (*Inst.* 1:6:1). He came near to representatives chosen from it. He spoke his Word to them, giving them his presence in a special way and revealing himself. As he did so, he changed their inner mind and attitude by his Spirit so that they become reconciled and receptive to the truth. Thus, one nation on earth began to know and to call on the true God. The Old Testament shows how through the centuries God lovingly and patiently brought the light of his Word in marvellous ways to the patriarchs, to Moses and the prophets, in preparation for Christ. The New Testament is the account of the same Word given to the apostles who witnessed to Jesus the Word made flesh (*Inst.* 1:6.1: 8:3-13).

The record of all the events and words which make up this work of God spanning the centuries has been preserved for us in the Old and New Testaments. It pleases God that we ourselves should come to know and experience the truth of God today only through the witness of those inspired prophets, writers and apostles to whom we owe this book. 'It is impossible,' writes Calvin, 'for anyone to enjoy the smallest portion of sound doctrine, unless he is taught by Holy Scripture' (*Inst.* 1:6:2).

When, however, we become responsive to the Word of God and are receptive to Holy Scripture, then we begin to be delivered from the 'depraved judgement' which originally vitiated our approach to nature, and we can now turn back to the natural world with a newly found ability to discern there the witness to God which we had previously excluded from our lives. Aided by Scripture, as eyes dimmed with age and weakness become aided by spectacles, we can begin to recognise what is truly before us in the world around us (*cf.* Introductory Argument to *Commentary on Genesis, CTS* transl., p.62; *Inst.* 1:14:1).

Holy Scripture is given to us in order that through its witness we might not only be given true and reliable statements about God, but also in order that we might also share in the personal knowledge of God which is at the heart of his self-revelation. In a short but significant paragraph in the first chapter of the *Institutes*, entitled in our most recent edition, '*Man Before God's Majesty*', Calvin quotes a series of biblical texts to remind us of the 'dread and amazement' with which 'holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God'.

He reminds us of Job, Abraham, Isaiah and Elijah all overcome with a sense of their own folly, feebleness and corruption, as they became conscious that the living God himself had drawn near to them. This is, for Calvin, the kind of situation, or position, in which a true knowledge of God can take place and in which theology becomes possible. What we read of in Holy Scripture as happening to Old Testament men in the field, or in the temple, must now happen to us in our very different circumstances today. We must be able to say not simply that we know the book, its truth and its teaching, but that through its ministry we too have stood in the presence of our maker and redeemer, have heard his voice and have been given the same intimate knowledge of his will and nature as our forefathers in the faith.

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

It is within the church, as the pastor fulfils his holy ministry in Word and sacrament, that God draws near to us as he did to them. 'God himself appears ... and requires his presence to be recognized in our midst'. Even though such a treasure is given to us in 'earthen vessels', nevertheless in the hearing of the preached Word within the Church we hear the same voice as they heard. We 'listen not only to his ministers speaking but to himself'. So real and personal is his presence in such an encounter today that to deny or resist it would be like blotting out the face of God which indeed shines through such teaching' (*Inst.* 4:1:5 ; cf. *Commentary* on 1 Cor.4:7).

In discussing how God has been able to bring himself, whether under the Old or the New Covenant, into such personal dealing with the individual that he can become known in this close and intimate way, Calvin uses the doctrine of accommodation. If God drew near and showed himself to any of us as he is in his naked glory and greatness, 'his incomparable brightness would bring us to nothing' (*Commentary* on Exodus 33:20). We would be overwhelmed completely in our sinfulness, and would be incapable of grasping anything of his greatness. Therefore in his approach to men in the Old Testament he 'accommodated himself to their capacity' and 'assumed the kind of form they were able to bear', clothing himself in various signs and symbols. In a similar way today, he draws near when the Holy Scripture is preached within the church, and the sacraments are being administered, and uses the audible human speech and visible actions which are offered in the service of his name to veil his presence and communicate his grace – just as he used the symbols and signs of the older dispensation. Thus today God 'appears in our midst', 'allures us to himself', 'displays and unfolds his power to save' (*Inst.* 4:1:5). For Calvin therefore Holy Scripture, as the Word of God to us, is not only an infallible source of true doctrine but also an instrumental means of God's self-revelation. God's Word, spoken in this personal way, creates faith in the minds and hearts of those who hear. Since God in his Word offers friendship and makes promises, personal trust is always an important element in our

response to him. Calvin's definition of faith describes it as 'a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour towards us founded in the free promise of Christ, revealed to our minds, and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (*Inst.* 3:2:7).

### **The Mystical Element in our Knowledge of God**

The mention here of the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the divine favour to our minds, and sealing the truth in our hearts, leaves room for consideration of what we can justifiably call a 'mystical' element in Calvin's experience and understanding of our knowledge of God. We can understand this best if we note the attention which he paid to the element of vision on our part when revelation takes place. Certainly Calvin stressed the auditory element in our experience of the Word of God. 'True acquaintance with God', wrote Calvin, 'is made more by the ears than by the eyes' (*Commentary* on Exodus 33:19). When God uses visual elements alongside the spoken Word in his earthly approach to men, Calvin notes that these are there usually to 'confirm and ratify the truth of his Word' (*Commentary* on Numbers 12:6).

Calvin struggled in his mind to do justice to the biblical accounts of certain theophanies – experiences in which men are said to have seen 'the heavens opened' and to have been given 'visions of God'. These phrases are, for example, used by Ezekiel to describe his experience by the river Chebar, but they could also apply to incidents in the careers of Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, in the Old Testament, and of Stephen in the New Testament. In his *Commentary* on Ezekiel's vision Calvin interprets the phrase 'The heavens were opened' metaphorically ('not that they are opened in reality'), yet he insists that the whole account of the incident must be taken to signify an important experience of seeing. Ezekiel was indeed given an inner eye to see, behind and beyond normally visible reality. 'Removing every obstacle', God 'allows the eye of the faithful to penetrate even to his celestial glory' (*Commentary* on Ezekiel 1:2). Calvin compares Ezekiel's experience to that of Stephen whose eyes, at

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

the hour of his martyrdom 'were doubtless illumined with unusual powers of perceiving far more than men can behold (*Ibid*).

Calvin therefore does not regard Ezekiel's experience of vision as being peculiar to his day and calling. It was, rather, 'something continuous which was always to exist in his kingdom'. Joel's prophecy, he reminds us (*Commentary* on John 1:15, and on Joel 2:28), implies that under the New Covenant we ourselves should excel the old in matters of vision. Stephen, for example, was given 'other than earthly eyes so that by their peculiar sight they may fly all the way up to the glory of God' (*Commentary* on Acts 7:55). We ourselves are meant to look beyond the earth and raise our thoughts to God himself (*Inst.* 1:1:2). Like Nathaniel we are all meant to 'see the heavens opened' when we look at the Son of Man (*Commentary* on John 1:51). 'What happened then is perpetually living'.

The experience of the ordinary Christian in the presence of God or the living Christ cannot, then, be adequately described simply as one of hearing. It was also one of 'seeing' or 'tasting' or of being 'lifted up into heaven'. Calvin had exalted views of what happened to Isaiah during his vision in the temple. According to his capacity he was allowed to 'perceive the inconceivable majesty of God'. Yet what happened then to Isaiah happens today to Christians when God reveals himself to them: 'There is no absurdity in supposing that God comes down to men today in such a manner as to cause some kind of mirror to reflect his glory' (*Commentary* on Isaiah 6:1). By the earthly means which he often uses in revealing himself to us, God seeks to 'bear us up as if in chariots to his own heavenly glory which with its immensity, fills all things, and in height is above the heavens' (*Inst.* 4:1:5).

In describing the nature of our knowledge of God Calvin therefore quite often speaks of the penetrating and comprehensive power of faith through the Spirit – its ability to

soar on to a realm beyond the reach of human understanding, and to contemplate God himself. 'When we are drawn (i.e. by the Spirit) we are both in mind and heart raised up far above our own understanding. For the soul, when illumined by him, receives, as it were, a new eye enabling it to contemplate heavenly mysteries by the splendour of which it was previously dazzled.' And it happens that man's understanding, irradiated by the light of the Holy Spirit, begins to taste those things which pertain to the kingdom of God. Previously it had been too foolish and stupid to relish them (*Inst.* 3:2:34).

Even as we meditate on the nature of the Trinity we are reminded by Calvin that God offers himself to our faith not only to be heard and trusted, but to be contemplated (*Inst.* 1:13:2), and we are urged to 'look upon the one God, to unite with him, and to cleave to him' (*Inst.* 1:13:6). In one important passage Calvin seems to be giving us a carefully worded description of his own experience. 'When we call faith "knowledge" we do not mean the kind of comprehension we have of things which normally fall under human sense perception. It is a knowledge so much superior that the human mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it. Even where the mind has attained, it does not comprehend what it feels. But while it is persuaded of what it does not grasp, it understands more by the certainty of its persuasion than it could discern of any human matter by its own capacity' (*Inst.* 3:2:14).

Calvin attributes such experiences not to the exercise or discipline of our natural 'spiritual' faculties such as, *e.g.*, transcendental meditation might involve, but to the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in us, as we come to be in Christ. Such experiences, he affirms, are due to the fact that God himself 'comes down to us in order to be near to us ... to bear us up as in chariots to his heavenly glory'. It is the Holy Spirit who thus lifts us up to see. 'Our mind is too rude to be able to grasp the spiritual wisdom of God revealed to us through faith.... But the Holy Spirit by his illumination, makes us

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

capable of understanding those things which would otherwise far exceed our grasp' (*Inst.* 4:1:5).

In the incarnate life of Jesus his glory was, though present, 'unknown to most because of their blindness', and was seen 'only by those whose eyes the Holy Spirit had opened', so today even though God may be present with the signs which can admit us to a vision of his glory, we too remain blind until we are beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit' (*Commentary* on John 4:14, *Institutes* 3:2:34).

We have called this aspect of our knowledge of God 'mystical' because we have found a phraseology like that which Calvin uses to describe it often also used by writers like Richard of St Victor, Tauler, Bernard, Gregory Palamas, Thomas Merton, and we feel certain that if students of mysticism could overcome the prejudices which the current traditional picture of Calvin tends to create in our minds, then they might find something akin to themselves. We assume that Calvin, in these accounts, was using such language because from his reading he felt it best fitted his own experiences. Such experiences may date from the moment of his conversion. We note in his short autobiographical account of this event the use of the word 'taste' and the reference to a 'knowledge' which 'inflamed a desire to make progress' (see Introduction to *Commentary* on Psalms).

### **Our Basic Dependence on the Written Word**

Calvin often reminds us that we cannot expect to find the Holy Spirit at work in our midst, if we in any way neglect or despise Scripture which is, after all, the 'school of the Holy Spirit' (*Inst.* 3:21:3). 'The Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth, which he expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power' (*Inst.* 1:9:3). We cannot expect our minds to be raised up heavenwards by the Spirit and to be enlightened with vision unless we make the Word of God and its accompanying sacraments, as it were, the door at which we

must wait for this gracious elevation of mind and heart. This requirement is brought out in Calvin's exposition of the story of Jacob at Bethel. Undoubtedly Jacob in this experience 'seeing God' 'penetrated into heaven'. Yet, the kingdom of heaven which Jacob entered in vision is opened to us when the Word of God is preached. The sacraments 'can be called the gate of heaven because they admit us into the presence of God'. Word and sacraments together, 'those helps of faith ... by which God raises us to himself, can be called the gates of heaven' (*Commentary* on Genesis 28:17). The implication is that we cannot enter except by this door.

Besides underlining our dependence on the written Word in relation to the dynamic and mystical elements which enter our knowledge of God, Calvin also continually reminds us of our complete dependence on Holy Scripture for all trustworthy teaching and reliable historical information. Nothing can be added to this teaching. 'Let this be a firm axiom. No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given a place in the church, than that which is contained first in the law and the prophets, and secondly, in the writings of the apostles: and the only accepted way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and rule of his Word' (*Inst.* 4:8:8). To bypass this word is 'to walk where there is no path, and to seek light in darkness' (*Inst.* 3:2:21). To deviate even a hair's breadth from the direction of their word is 'to cast yourself of your own accord into a labyrinth' (*Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:19; *Commentary* on John 3:33).

### **Faith Seeks Understanding**

Calvin's comment on Moses' immediate reaction to the sign of God's presence at the burning bush helps us to understand why he himself tried, after his conversion, to devote his life to the study of theology. 'And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight"'. Let us learn then, by the example of Moses, as often as God invites us to himself by any sign, to give diligent heed, lest the proffered light be quenched by our own

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

apathy' (*Commentary* on Exodus 3:3). Holy Scripture challenges us as the burning bush did Moses, to continued theological reflection. It demands our interpretation so that its manifold wisdom can be displayed in all its wealth, beauty, clarity and unity. 'How wonderful it is', writes Calvin, 'when we are given confirmation through more intense study, of how admirably the economy of the divine wisdom contained in it is arranged and disposed; how perfectly free the doctrine is from everything that savours of earth; how beautifully it harmonizes in all its parts, how many other qualities give an air of majesty to its composition' (*Inst.* 1:8:1). Calvin pursued his task as a theologian in the belief that the unity and rationality of God himself must inevitably be reflected in the Word he has spoken in Holy Scripture. The theologian seeks to bring out the order and system which are hidden there amidst the profusion of its stories and statements, and the apparent confusion of its truths, and he should find joy in doing so.

The theologian, even when he is absorbed in working with the book, will not be able to forget that Holy Scripture is the means by which God himself seeks to draw near to him in his work, and is the door through which his mind has been lifted up to the same kind of vision which characterised the biblical writers themselves. 'What our mind entrances by faith is in every way infinite' (*Inst.* 3:2:14), wrote Calvin speaking as a theologian. He also speaks in this respect of our receiving the eye to contemplate what cannot be reached by normal ways of thought, and of a knowledge (*scientia*) which is superior to all understanding (*notitia*), unreachable by the acuteness of our intellect (*Commentary* on Ephesians 3:18; *cf.* *Inst.* 3:2:14, 34). The theologian in his work must seek to grapple in his mind with what his faith has thus seen. He must expect clarification of the vision to follow the vision, as Christ demonstrated when he cured the man at Bethsaida from his blindness.

The movement of Calvin's mind in his theological thought is therefore well described by Anselm: 'The Christian ought to advance through faith to knowledge, not to come through

knowledge to faith, nor, if he cannot know, recede from faith. But when he is about to attain to knowledge he rejoices; and when unable, he reveres that which he is unable to grasp.<sup>1</sup> His theology can therefore be defined as 'faith seeking understanding'. He would have agreed that the chief task of the theologian is not to discover, but rather to clarify the truth that is already given to us in its fullness in the gospel. Such clarification can help, of course, to assimilate the truth into our minds, and eventually to apply it to our lives and to the activity of the church. It can, however, apart from practical results be justified for its own sake. In the course of clarification deeper vision is attained. As Augustine put it, 'We believe in order to understand'.

### **Away from Ourselves!**

Calvin was always aware that in the pursuit of theology, what most hinders arrival at the truth lies not in any obscurity attaching to the revelation, or even to Holy Scripture, but in the natural limitation and perversity of the mind of the theologian. We all have within us a 'lust to devise new and strange religions'. In trying to understand what is before us we tend to work under the bondage of our own 'depraved judgement' and we lose the truth in the 'labyrinth of our minds' (*Inst.* 1:6:3). Though we may profess the faith, and by the grace of God have made some progress in the Christian way, there nevertheless still lurks within each of us a natural spirit, resistant to truth and self-centered – an autonomous human mind. By the sheer bias of our nature even in face of the open Bible, our 'perverted ardour' (*cf. Inst.* 4:17:25) takes control, and we conjure up for ourselves imaginary pictures of God, make him such as our reason conceives him to be, 'reducing him to the level of our low condition' (*cf. Commentary* on Romans 1:21-2). Fascinated by what we can produce from our own thoughts, we become so busy seeking what does not exist that we can fail to

---

1. Quoted by R. Seeberg, *History of Dogma*, Grand Rapids, 1977, Vol. II, p. 57.

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

find what does exist (*Inst.* 3:23:2). Most dangerous of all is our tendency always to drag God down to the evil of our own minds and our logic and to imprison him within our own subjectivity.

Calvin was well aware that under the impact of revelation we enter a new experience of self-awareness. The light which comes to us imparts a new quality even to our subjectivity. When we have seen God, 'we begin to feel and know what we are' (*Commentary* on Isaiah 6:5). Calvin refers to this bi-polar aspect of revelation in the opening words of his *Institutes*: 'Nearly all our wisdom, in so far as it can be regarded as true and solid, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God, and of ourselves' (*Inst.* 1:1:1). So vivid does our self-consciousness become under the impress of revelation that we are tempted to confuse what is being presented to us from the direction of objectivity with what is revealed in our own subjectivity: 'While joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern'. The danger now is that man within this rich disclosure situation will begin to lose sight of what should have priority, give way to his inherent self-centredness and become absorbed in examining himself. He will thus destroy the bi-polarity. He will again confuse the objective truth with his subjective experience of it, and his knowledge of God will become false and unsound. Therefore the first rule to be absorbed by the theologian or interpreter of Holy Scripture must always be that of self-denial. We find Calvin enunciating this rule as he describes his own practice in exegesis: we do not with preposterous fervour rashly and without discrimination seize upon what *first* springs to our minds; but after careful meditation upon it, we embrace the meaning which the Spirit of God suggests. Holding on to it we look down as from a height on whatever opposition may be offered by earthly wisdom. Indeed we hold our minds captive, not allowing even one little word of protest, and humble them that they may not presume to rebel (*Inst.* 4:17:25).

It is of course only by the grace of God that we are enabled to deal forcibly enough with our inner bias to falsehood in this matter. This is why Calvin insists that theology must always be done in the presence of the living God himself who alone can subdue our minds to his truth (*Inst.* 1:1:2). In his *Commentary* on Daniel he discusses the vivid picture of what happened to the prophet when he collapsed before the 'great vision' of the man clothed in linen, and when his appearance became abject and pitiful, and he confessed: 'I did not retain my vigour'. Calvin's comments at this point seem to be specially directed to the problem we are discussing. 'We ought to learn to transfer this instruction to ourselves, not by the vanishing of our vigour, or the changing of our appearance whenever God addresses us, but by all our resistance giving way, and all our pride and loftiness becoming prostrate before God. Finally our carnal disposition ought to be reduced to nothing ... all our senses mortified ... for we must always remember how hostile all our natural thoughts are to the will of God' (*Commentary* on Daniel 10:8).

In the presence of the living Word of God, our minds are not only subdued by the brilliance of the light that comes through to them, they are also opened and lifted up to find a new centre of gravity. Calvin reminds us of how the faith we are given by the Word and Spirit, in the presence of God, can deliver and transport our mind entirely away from ourselves into the Word.

Luther had already often given expression to the liberating power of faith in this connection in unforgettable language: 'And this is the reason why our theology is certain', he wrote, 'it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside of ourselves and places us outside of ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive'.<sup>2</sup> Calvin echoed the same thing in less

---

2. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 27, p. 387.

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

dramatic style: he points out that as we deny ourselves the Holy Spirit gives us the power to surpass ourselves. He pictures the mind of man as rising up and going 'beyond itself' as it attains the knowledge given to its faith. We do not possess the things of our salvation, he affirmed, unless we can 'transcend the reach of our own intellect and raise our perception above all worldly objects and, in short, surpass ourselves' (*Inst.* 3:2:14, 3:2:41).

He therefore decisively rejected the theological method which would begin with the analysis of our self-consciousness (or our own inner God-consciousness) and would decide the shape of objective doctrine as the soul reflects on its own experience. Though it is not always easy to disentangle what belongs to our self knowledge from what belongs to God. Calvin insists that by the grace of God, and the power of the Spirit we can correct our inner bias to distort and confuse the different elements in the revelation presented to us, and thus quite clearly to discern 'the right order of teaching' which is of course the right order for our theological study (*Inst.* 1:1:1-3). This is that our whole attention should from the beginning be taken up not with our own impressions or feelings but with the reality with which we are confronted when God reveals himself.

Calvin's theological method in this respect is perfectly expressed in words written some years ago by a Roman Catholic theologian. 'If God is God and infinitely richer in reality than ourselves, and if he communicates a word which is rich with his own life and truth, spelling again for us, it is essential that we on our part should submit to be mastered by it, to be drawn up into it instead of dragging it down into ourselves and interpreting it by our own measure of life and experience. That is to say, the test of a divine message is that it should command us and work its way in us without gloss and contamination, and the most disastrous temptation that we can suffer is to desire to test it by our own experience'.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. M. C. Darcy, *The Nature of Belief*, London, 1931, p. 246.

Calvin's stress as a theologian is, therefore, always on what is before our minds rather than on what is within our minds as an independent and exalted object of our knowing, and in such a way that there can be no confusion between God himself and our own subjectivity. We would imagine also from other aspects of Calvin's thought and teaching that he would regard revelation as an event in which God linked himself up with what is objective in the sphere of human knowledge and human reality – just as he assumed 'flesh' in the incarnation. In his doctrine of Word and sacraments, for example, Calvin regards the eternal Word of God as presenting himself to be heard and received, not merely subjectively but decisively within objective reality.

Even in the ecstatic experience of contemplation to which we have given the name 'mystical', this uniquely sharp subject-object relationship between God and ourselves in which God is sovereign, is not impaired or destroyed. We have seen that in such experience too, it is by the Holy Spirit that we are raised above the earth, and are enabled to contemplate what exceeds our understandings (*Inst.* 3:2:34). Calvin speaks as if the knowledge given to us in such an experience is a knowledge in which the human mind is passive – a knowledge impressed on it by what is contemplated. He speaks of the mind as being 'beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit', of the Spirit as making entry for the Word of God, of the mind as 'absorbing the Word' and as becoming 'endowed with thought' (*Inst.* 3:2:34, 3:2:36).

It is at this point that we can understand most fully what Calvin meant when he said 'All right knowledge of God is born of obedience' (*Inst.* 1:6:2). He speaks at times of a compulsive pressure on the mind as it feels itself under the impact of revelation. We become 'profoundly affected' as 'we feel within ourselves the force of it' (*Inst.* 1:5:9). He confesses that his mind is not simply 'overwhelmed' but also 'conquered'. This suggests that the mind is taken under control by its object, as it tries to shape its new thoughts. It follows in its thinking

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

the patterns inherent in the revelation before it. 'The pious mind', writes Calvin, 'does not dream up for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates the one and only true God. And it does not attach to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him as he manifests himself; furthermore the mind always exercises the utmost diligence and care not to wander astray, or rashly and boldly to go beyond his will' (*Inst.* 1:2:2). As C.C.J. Webb puts it: 'The mind is so completely informed by its object that there is as little as possible in the notion we have of the object which belongs to our way of apprehending it and not really to the object itself'.<sup>4</sup>

### The Search for System and Definition

Calvin regarded his task always as that of rendering a faithful and systematic account of the teaching of Holy Scripture. The theologian is and must always remain a man before the Bible. No experience is genuine which lifts his mind beyond its control. Holy Scripture, Calvin affirmed, is 'the school of the Holy Spirit'. It is impossible for anyone to enjoy any true inspiration or even the smallest portion of sound doctrine unless he is taught by it. It must become our only guide and our only light. We must not 'speak our guess or even seek to know ... anything except what has been imparted to us by God's word' (*Inst.* 1:21:3, 1:16:2, 3:21:2, 1:14:4).

It is often asserted that Calvin had a naturally systematizing and logical mind, and that it was by applying his logical power to the mass of data given within the texts of Scripture before him that he produced the theological system known as 'Calvinism'. Students of Calvin have sometimes tried to analyse his *Institutes* in order to find the principles he used in producing such a system. Various central principles such as predestination or the sovereignty of God have been suggested. It has been suggested, for example, that his theological discussion was dominated by his desire to give a balanced account of the

---

4: *Problems in the Relations of God to Man*, London, 1915, p. 45.

various contradictions of opposites which are found among the biblical texts. Certainly Calvin tried to be systematic in his theological presentation of the whole gospel, since he believed in the unity and rationality of the Word of God. As he wrote his commentaries on the Bible, and thus deepened and expanded his knowledge of the Word, he constantly revised his *Institutes*, rearranging the order of the discussion and altering his text. We believe, however, that Calvin resisted any tendency he might have had to master the biblical material before him, and to mould it into shape by his logical skill or by his own creative intelligence. He always strove, rather, to bring his mind under the shaping power of the objective reality before him, and to find the logic inherent in the revelation itself. He sought to allow his mind to be taken up, by faith, into the Word itself, and to become penetrated by it. He sought thus to produce a system which reflected the rationality of the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>

This meant that, as he worked with the biblical writers, he never forgot that the object of his theology was the One to whom they bore witness. He had to concern himself with God's actions in history, with the whole story of salvation, promised and fulfilled in Christ. He had to try to hear the words of the living Lord who comes to speak today through the Scriptures. Therefore, as he dealt with the texts which occupied his mind and sought to compare one with another, to interrelate the themes they discussed, and to give his thinking direction and coherence, he had to penetrate beyond the words of the writers to the reality to which they witnessed, and to bring his mind under the compelling power which had originally inspired them.

---

5. On this point see e.g. T. F. Torrance, *Belief in Science and the Christian Life*, Edinburgh, 1980, pp. 4, 9; *Theology in Reconstruction*, London, 1965, pp. 95-6. Simone Weil in *Waiting upon God*, p. 72, writes of 'attention', which she defines as an act of 'suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object .... All our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything but already to receive in its naked truth the object which should penetrate it'.

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

Calvin's method was simply that of following in his theological thinking the rationality that is inherent in revelation, with confidence in the possibility of a true correspondence between his thinking about God and the reality of God encountered in revelation. He certainly did not regard his theological thinking as something that provided or created rationality over against a revelation that was entirely noumenal or non-rational.

Calvin was always aware of the inadequacy of his language and even of his thought as he tried to fulfil his task as a theologian. He knew that he could not do justice to 'so great a mystery' as the gospel presents. He confessed such feelings specially when he tried to grapple with the mystery of the Lord's Supper: 'Although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the magnitude of the thing' (*Inst.* 4:17:7). He quoted Hilary, confessing that he shrank from submitting to the peril of human speech what ought to have been kept with reserve within the mind (*Inst.* 1:13:5). He realised that there were many features in the order and arrangement of his doctrines which even after his best efforts inevitably appeared to contradict human logic. Yet he felt challenged to try both to understand and describe, and he believed he could be of service to the church by giving himself to such a task. 'I will give a summary of my views', he resolved, 'I have no doubt as to its truth. I am confident that it will not meet disapproval from the pious heart'. He believed that, like Paul, he would be helped by prayer and the teaching of the Holy Spirit (*Inst.* 4:17:7 and *Commentary* on Ephesians 3:18).<sup>6</sup>

We have to be cautious, therefore, in the way we apply the word 'systematic' to the mind and thought of Calvin. For a thinker to discover definite forms and shapes within what has been a seemingly incoherent mass of inspired thoughts and

---

6. Medieval mystics were sometimes suspicious that theological speculation would simply lead to loss of the power to appreciate divine things by contemplation. Others believed that clarification would lead to deeper vision.

utterances, and for him to be able to give these new and genuine expressions in a convincing order, does not necessarily imply that his is a logical and systematising mind, forcing its own principles and currents of reasoning on the data before him to give them shape imposed from without. It simply means that he has a mind sensitive to the realities of the world of life and thought around him. The 'beautiful' order (*cf. Inst.* 1:8:1) in which Calvin was able to cast his thought was an order which, with all the artistry and scientific skill of a good theologian, he found concealed in the revelation which had come to him. He had delight and joy in faithfully preserving it as he brought it to light. Calvin certainly brought precise and exact thinking into the decisions he made and the work he did. But it was thinking done by a man whose mind had been totally 'subdued' and 'made tractable', (see Calvin's account of his conversion in his Introduction to *Commentary on Psalms*) under the impact of the Word of God. It has been argued that those who subjected Reformed theology to logical thinking and to the basic principles of their own minds were the later successors of Calvin and of Luther too, the men especially of the third generation. In seeking to fulfil the task Calvin remained always aware that even in achieving clarity there must be no violation of the essential mystery that must always remain at the heart of everything, where God is active, present and personal. But it was precisely because of such mystery that clarity was all the more necessary, not in thinking *through* the mystery of the faith, but in thinking *round* it, in showing where it lies, how great it is and must remain, and in opposing the false doctrines that might obscure it. Even the mystery would be weakened and obscured by irrationality and by careless thinking and language. On one occasion Calvin wrote Pierre Viret instructions to give to the Dean of his area as to the attitude he should adopt in the discussions that were then taking place over the sacrament: 'let him fearlessly set aside all unreasonable views, in replying to them and warning them, taking care that he does not weaken the truths in so doing. Nor is it allowable to complicate by ambiguous and obscure language what requires the utmost clearness or perspicuity' (*Letter to Viret*, August

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

1542). He himself achieved this aim. Someone said of him, 'There is hardly perhaps a sentence in his works which requires to be read twice in order to be understood'.

### Theology and Godliness

In Calvin's thought and practice we find the same intimate connection between theology, piety and godliness which we find in all the early fathers of the church. The surrender and obedience of the mind to God which make true theology possible involve the surrender and obedience of the whole life to God.

'How can it help us, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather our knowledge should result first to teach us reverence and fear, and secondly, under the guidance of its teaching to ask every good thing from him, and when it is received to ascribe it to him. For how can the idea of God enter your mind without giving rise to the thought that since you are his workmanship you are bound by the very law of creation to submit to his command, and that you owe your life to him?' (*Inst.* 1:2:2). In his description of the Christian life Calvin contrasts the 'philosopher' who assigns to reason the sole direction of conduct, with the Christian philosopher who submits his understanding to the Holy Spirit so that he himself no longer lives, but Christ lives within him. 'We are consecrated and dedicated to God', he reminds us, 'that we may henceforth neither think, nor speak, meditate, and act except to his glory' (*Inst.* 3:7:1).

In seeking our response to his redemptive work God certainly appeals first of all for the response of our intellect to a rationally understood Word. 'The intellect', Calvin taught us, 'is to us the guide and ruler of the soul ... the will always follows its bidding, and waits for its decision in matters of desire' (*Inst.* 1:15:7). Through the mind, however, God seeks also the simultaneous response of will and affections, and there never can be a complete and obedient surrender of the mind to the

Word, unless the other faculties are thus involved. Christianity 'is a doctrine not of the tongue but of the life and is not apprehended merely by the intellect and memory, like other sciences, but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat and habitation in the innermost recesses of the heart' (*Inst.* 3:6:4, *cf.* 3:2:8). We have to pour into the heart what the mind has imbibed, for the Word of God is not received by faith if it merely flutters in the brain' (*Inst.* 3:2:36). From its seat in mind and heart the Word must also 'pass into the conduct, and thus transform us itself so as not to prove unfruitful' (*Inst.* 3:6:4), for when God's truth is encountered it seeks to transform the knower himself. 'We cannot possibly know God if we do not keep his commandments and show ourselves dutiful children and obedient servants' (*Commentary* on 1 John 2:3). Here then is a test for our own theology: 'Truth that does not seek to transform the knower is only the empty ghost of knowledge' (*Ibid.*). What was once well said of Augustine could be repeated of Calvin: 'Truth entire entered the whole man'.

The theologian should find himself continually drawn on and inspired in his theological quest by a desire for communion and union with God. He should find himself, as he makes progress, more and more drawn into this quest. 'As soon as the least particle of faith is instilled in our minds we begin to contemplate the face of God, peaceful, serene and showing favour towards us. We see him far off indeed, but still so clearly that we know ourselves to be in no way deluded. Then the more we advance (and we ought assiduously to do so) making steady progress, then our view of things becomes closer and more sure, and as it continues he is made even more familiar to us' (*Inst.* 3:2:19). He thus confesses the ardour he felt in pursuit of this aim: 'Even Plato groping in his darkness felt "ravished" by his idea of the beautiful! How then is it possible to know God and yet be touched with no feelings?' The same Spirit who enlightens our minds when God is known also inspires our hearts with 'an affection corresponding to our knowledge' (*Commentary* on 1 John 2:3). 'To believe with the

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

whole heart', he wrote, 'is not to believe Christ perfectly, but only to embrace him from the heart with a sincere mind, not to be filled with him, but with ardent affection to hunger and thirst and sigh after him' (*Inst.* 4:14:8; cf. *Commentary* on Acts 8:3).

The theologian in this search after God finds that his 'mental powers are held in wondering suspense' (*Inst.* 1:5:9). He finds himself so overwhelmed by the greatness and holiness before him that all thought of investigation ceases and he can only adore (*Brève Instruction Chrétienne*, 1537, 1:3). Theology, always near to prayer, passes into it. At one point Calvin quotes Augustine: 'You wish to argue with me? Marvel with me and exclaim, "O depth!" Let us both agree in fear lest we perish in error' (*Institutes* 3:22:10). Blending with this devotional fervour was also the desire for the consummation of those experiences which we have referred to as mystical. These gave Calvin a passion to see and understand more of what he has already been lifted up in heart and mind to contemplate, to taste more of what he has already been given.

All this enables us to place Calvin in his theological quest among those who found themselves, as a recent author put it, 'gripped by an almost biological hunger for fulfilment – for that beatific vision of God, of which faith is the earthly bait'.<sup>7</sup> After all, for Calvin, the whole of the Christian life was to be lived as 'nothing more than a meditation on immortality'. (*Brève Instruction Chrétienne* 1:1). He found his mind as a theologian reflected in a memorable passage which he quotes, again from Augustine: 'We have entered into the way of faith, let us constantly hold to it. It leads to the chambers of the king in which are hidden all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom ... We must walk, we must make progress. We must grow, that our hearts may be capable of those things which we cannot yet grasp. But if the last day shall find us making progress, we shall learn there what is beyond us here' (*Inst.* 3:21:2).

---

7. M. D. Chenu, *Is Theology a Science?*, New York, 1964, p. 30.

## Church Theology

It must now be admitted that those aspects of Calvin's approach to theology which we have so far selected for the purpose of our discussion have given such a one-sided description of the man at his work as to be almost deceptive. Calvin, of course, did not approach his task as a solitary scholar of the Bible, with mystical tendencies, concerned to classify his own vision of God, even for the sake of teaching others. For him theology was church theology. The church in his time was threatened by false teaching from within and beset by vicious enemies in the world outside. The theologian was a doctor of the church, called by God into leadership in this critical situation, and charged with the pastoral care of the flock as a whole. The theologian is called by God to leave 'purposeless, speculative study' in order to 'labour in the word and teaching' (*cf. Commentary* on 1 Timothy 5:17). Because such a work was onerous and troublesome he himself had at first shrunk from it till Farel had importuned him to become such a teacher within the church at Geneva. He had wanted rather, at first, to devote himself to a purely academic life. He saw too many theologians in his day who tended to keep themselves apart from the everyday struggles of the church, and he was suspicious that some in his day engaged in theological teaching and discussion simply because they loved to talk and be heard. It is easy for a man within the shady precincts of the school to be a ready talker. 'Many wish to be teachers', he wrote, 'and there is hardly one, who is not anxious to be listened to' (*Inst.* 3:12:1; *Commentary* on Leviticus 1:6; *cf.* James 3:1).

He saw it as most important for the health of the church that there should be teachers within it who can note what is being said in the pulpits, both to criticise errors which might arise in the church, and to listen to new truth from the Word which might help to reform the accepted faith at different points. There is a need here for love, unity and willingness to reform. Calvin can speak of 'an unerring standard both for our speaking

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

and thinking about God' which 'must be derived from Scripture' (*Inst.* 1:6:3). He also sought 'by simple and accurate explanation to render Christian doctrine more and more plain and clear to men, and rid their minds of vague causes of discord' (*cf. Inst.* 4:17:25).

Calvin would, of course, not have thought it possible to fulfil his task as a theologian apart from dialogue and communion with others alongside of him in the fellowship of the church. He attended conferences when he could, entered fellowship with other theologians in the world church, corresponded with them voluminously, gave advice and listened to it. 'God', he once wrote, 'could indeed himself have covered the earth with a multitude of men; but it was his will that we should proceed from one mountain, in order that our desire for mutual accord might be greater, and that each might the more freely embrace the other as his own flesh.' He 'has never so blessed his servants that each possessed pure and perfect knowledge on every part of their subject' (*Commentary* on Genesis 1:28; Dedicatory letter to *Commentary* on Romans). Likewise Calvin knew that to help him to come to the fullest possible insight into the teaching of the Holy Scripture he must put himself into debt to the fathers of the church. A superficial perusal of the *Institutes* will reveal how great that debt was.

### Theology in Conflict

We could call Calvin's theology a 'confessional' theology. Truth was a trust committed to him by God to be protected in every way and even at the cost of human life. We must not lessen it in anything. To hide it in any way from others or to present it in less than its fulness, thus diminishing its truth, would be to behave like a thief playing fast and loose with another's property (*Letter to Louis du Tillet*, 31 Jan. 1538). He could not therefore for a moment bear to see or hear it denied or distorted by anyone without going to its defence. 'When I see the heavenly doctrine of Christ, of which he has please to make me a minister, everywhere contemptuously outraged, how

disgraceful it would be for me to hold my peace' (*Letter to the Pastors of Berne, May 1555*). The moral and political struggles of the times demanded confession of faith, and for a man to confess his faith required theological thinking and statement. 'How, indeed, can this faith, which lies buried in the heart within, do otherwise than break forth in ... confession?' he wrote to Luther, who himself had written, 'A man becomes a theologian by living, dying and by being damned' (*Letter to Luther, 21 Jan. 1545*).

Calvin therefore felt that the theologians of his age whose views deserved to be listened to with greatest respect were those who had proved the truth of their theology by martyrdom. In Crespin's *History of the Martyrs* there is a remarkable passage in a letter from him to some believers suffering for their faith who had written to him asking for his judgement on their creed – whether its theology was correct or required modification. Calvin's reply shows clearly how little he cared about correctness in an utterance of faith, so long as it was an expression of the boldness and devotion of heart inspired by the Spirit. 'I do not send you such a confession of faith as our good brother required of me, for God will render that which he enables you to frame, according to the will of the Spirit imparted to you, far more profitable than any which might be suggested to you by others. Even when desired by some of our brethren, who shed their blood for the glory of God, to revise and correct the confession which they had made, I was very glad to see it that I might receive edification therefrom: but I would not add or diminish a single word, thinking that any alteration would have diminished the authority and efficacy, which ought to be attributed to the wisdom and constancy which plainly proceed from the Spirit of God'.<sup>8</sup>

For Calvin the first virtue required for a man who would be a true theologian was not learning or cleverness but courage, and time and again he confesses his thankfulness that the grace of

---

8. Quoted by P. Henry, *Life of Calvin*, Vol. I, p. 295.

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

God has enabled him to be faithful to the truth and to choose it in the face of danger, in spite of his natural timidity. He once in a letter reproached Melanchthon for his slowness to declare his mind and take a side on an important theological issue. 'While, however, you dread, as you would some hidden rock, to meddle with this question from the fear of giving offence, you are leaving in perplexity and suspense very many persons who require from you somewhat of a more certain sound, on which they can repose; and besides, as I remember I have sometimes said to you, it is not over-creditable to us, that we refuse to sign, even with ink, that very doctrine which many saints have not hesitated to leave witnessed with their blood' (*Letter to Melanchthon*, 28th June 1545).

The same desire to confess and defend the truth lay behind all Calvin's polemical writing. A recent able student of Calvin has expressed some regret that whereas the Reformer 'reserved his elegance of style ... for orthodox theology, he showed his contempt for all deviating teaching with the language of the farmyard or the circus'.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly in his polemical writing he at times shocks our modern sensitivity in such matters. When he attacked the Lutheran, Joachim Westphal, in 1556 for his views on the Lord's Supper he used such a spate of vituperative and sometimes bitter language even his hardened opponent complained that he must have tried hard not to omit any kind of insult. Six hundred times, Westphal affirmed, Calvin had called him 'Thou fool!', thus ignoring Christ's dire warnings (*Calvin's Tracts*, vol.2, pp.347, 349).

The use of such a style can be partly explained as simply a fashion of the times. Yet Calvin affirmed that it cost him to assume such a harsh role and that in doing so he was simply deliberately playing his part in the struggle which theological existence involved in his day. He affirmed that he took no pleasure in being 'dragged into the contest'. He wrote later that

---

9. Peter Cook, 'Understanding Calvin', in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 58.

'the harshness of my language has been wrung from me against my will'. In describing how it happened he admits that his zeal had carried him beyond the limits of moderation: 'The book was hastily written. What the case required, and occurred spontaneously at the time, I dictated without any lengthened meditation and with a feeling ... remote from gall .... I had no bitterness in my heart'. Yet he had to make his opponent feel that 'the defenders of truth were not without sharp weapons' (*Letter to Zerkinden*, 4th July 1558; *Tracts*, vol.2, pp.347, 349).

His final line of defence was that Westphal had entered the public arena in order to challenge the truth. In such an arena, hitting and blood-letting were inevitable. If lions and bears have no right to complain of the public reaction to their savage attacks why should this 'delicate little man' himself expect to be treated like a brother when he dared to start playing the game of tearing up the truth of God in public? 'The whole question turns upon this', wrote Calvin, justifying himself – 'Did I attempt to avenge a private injury, or was it in defence of public cause that I strenuously oppose Westphal?' (*Tracts*, vol.2, p.351).

Westphal's writings which were being circulated had, he felt, degraded the ascension glory of Jesus Christ, and given public insult to the Lord. The honour of God was at stake. The church was being threatened. Such attacks demanded a response and the opposition had to be crushed, even ruthlessly. He believed he was justified in treating the enemy 'as if they were savage wild beasts' (*Letter to Melancthon*, 3rd August 1557).

### **The Pastoral Aim**

Alongside his concern to maintain the truth by public confession, Calvin's pastoral concern never fails to manifest itself in his theological writing. He was led to write the first edition of the *Institutes* with the avowed aim not only to defend

## CALVIN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

the faith against the calumnies of those who were persecuting its followers in France, but also to meet the needs of multitudes who were 'hungering and thirsting after Christ'.

Time and again we find as we read the book the theological argument is interrupted by a short sermon to the reader relating the matter on hand to our daily need, appealing to us to take comfort, and pressing us to make decisions. Equally often he will ask us to join him in an outburst of thanksgiving for the truth he has stated: 'Let us now eagerly triumph in the midst of our troubles .... Let us exult', he cries as he lectures about the final resurrection. Indeed he often composes little hymns woven mostly out of biblical texts but sometimes studded with citations from the fathers – all to help the reader not simply to understand doctrine, but to rejoice in the goodness of God and the all-sufficiency of Christ for every need. When he speaks to us about bearing our cross he pleads with us not to be bitter under our affliction, for he wants us to share the 'cheerful and happy heart' with which he himself is writing these words, and he adds that if we have this joy, we will find ourselves being thankful, even under our cross, and our very thankfulness will produce even more joy.<sup>10</sup>

In the course of the volume we often find the pastoral aim dictating the scope of the discussion. He restrains his mind when it wants to launch out on purely academic speculation. If he can give 'devout leaders' ... enough material to build up their faith it satisfies him (*Inst.* 3:25:3). In his Geneva Catechism he poses the question why the creed only mentions belief in life everlasting and does not speak about hell, and gives the answer: 'Since nothing is held by faith except what contributes to the consolation of the souls of the pious'. In his discussion of predestination, though, he admits that he has to pause over

---

10. Cf. e.g. *Inst.* 3:25:4; 1:17:10-11; 3:8:11. Is it not a valid supposition that the perfect clarity he achieved in his style and exposition was the result of such sheer hard labour to make sure that no reader could be left in uncertainty?

these matters which are being argued by the learned. He wants also to discuss those points which raise 'difficulty for the simple (*Inst.* 3:21:7). At the beginning of the whole discussion we are warned that we are moving into darkness, indeed, into a labyrinth in which souls can become lost, but in which there is 'very sweet fruit' to be found. In the middle of the discussion we are given the advice to make sure that our life has begun with God's call, so that we can end with the same, to turn our eyes to Christ in whom we see 'God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart', and we are urged to let the practice of this doctrine ... also ... flourish in our prayers (*Inst.* 3:24:4-5).