

John Calvin

Dr. Gannon Murphy

Calvin on the Knowledge of God

Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a consideration of our knowledge of God—where it comes from, how it is gleaned, and precisely what sort of knowledge it is. Thus, in considering his overall theology, it is right that we begin here as well. Indeed, the first two books of the *Institutes* deal entirely with human knowledge of God: Book I: ‘Knowledge of God the Creator’; Book II: ‘Knowledge of God the Redeemer.’

From our selected reading from the *Institutes* for this unit, there are at least three immediately discernable strands that form the rope of Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God: *religio* and *pietas* (religion and piety), the *sensus Divinitatis* (the natural ‘sense of the Divine’), and *accommodation*. It is the first of these, however, *pietas* and *religio*, that is of chief importance in understanding Calvin’s overall theology of knowledge and which forms a guideline that passes through the other two.

Even before these principles, however, it is Calvin’s implicit reliance on the Bible that informs his religious epistemology. Just as the Bible never once indulges the reader with logical, rational, or philosophical arguments for the simple existence God, so too does Calvin refrain from furnishing them. Thus, after considering the three components, we will conclude this unit with an examination of Calvin’s understanding of Biblical revelation which, for him, constitutes the only true, *saving* knowledge of God.



Engraving of Calvin from an oil painting in the University Library of Geneva.

Three Strands of Knowledge

Religio and Pietas

The very beginning of the *Institutes* commences in a statement concerning that which constitutes true wisdom, to wit, that wisdom itself ‘consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.’ (I.1.1.). Some theologians have argued that this first statement is actually the *entire* point of the *Institutes*, a contestable, but not entirely meritless, claim.¹

¹ See, for example, T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 13.

It is perhaps customary in our technological age to think of *knowledge* as a purely apprehensive or propositional enterprise—we have knowledge of this *object*, or that *thing*, or such-and-such a set of *data*. The key to understanding Calvin's doctrine of knowledge (*cognitione*), however, is to see it as something much fuller and more 'holistic.' For Calvin, to truly *know* God is to *love* God. Theological knowledge is not merely propositional in nature or a matter of mere intellectual assent (*assensus*). Rather, it must also be experiential, stemming from love that also manifests itself in adoration, trust, fear, and obedience to God. Calvin scholar, Edward Dowey, for example, refers to Calvin's concept of knowledge, as 'existential knowledge.'² The idea of coming to God merely in *mind* is an utterly foreign concept throughout the Calvinian corpus. Further, Calvin (like Luther) alludes to the nonsensical nature of conceiving of God as a mere *object* of knowledge.

Calvin uses the terms *religio* and *pietas* (1.2.1) which, unfortunately, do not translate well into our English words, *religion* and *piety*, both of which tend to connote merely a system of ecclesiology or perfunctory, external religious observance. Both words in the Latin, however, denote something much deeper. *Re-ligio* derives from *re*, 'again' and *ligere*, 'to bind.' Our contemporary words 'ligament' or 'ligature' come from this root. *Religare* literally means 'to bind fast.' The cognate term, *religiens*, literally means 'careful,' the opposite of *negligens*. *Religio*, then, means something more along the lines of 'careful attention to' as well as to 'be re-bound.' *Pietas*, while often suggesting merely 'dutifulness,' is better understood as 'dutiful kindness,' coming from the Latin root *pius*, literally 'kind.' Thus, *pietas* is friendly obedience toward the things of God. It is the perfect opposite of animosity toward godly things—to find oneself welcoming of and delighted in his or her Creator.

Calvin, characteristically never wanting to be misunderstood but always desiring clarity for his readers, defines *religio* as, 'confidence in God coupled with serious fear—fear, which both includes in it willing reverence, and brings along with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed by the law.' (1.2.2). On the other hand, *pietas* is 'that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires.' (1.2.1). In these, we see that what Calvin expounds is something rather far removed from a 'natural theology'—the idea of an irrefragable knowledge of God garnered apart from reverence and revelation, that is, a special and specific Word from God. Rather, Calvin speaks of the first step of *pietas* being, 'to acknowledge that God is a Father, to defend, govern, and cherish us, until he brings us to the eternal inheritance of his kingdom.' (II.6.4).

That true knowledge of God cannot be made separate from *pietas* and *religio* means, then, that overly-philosophical speculation about the *essence* or *substance* of God is necessarily ruled out. Calvin derides such pursuits as 'Epicurean' and admonishes us rather to seek out 'what things are agreeable to his [God's] nature.' (1.2.2).

² Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 24.

The Sensus Divinitatis

Calvin insists that, 'there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [which is] beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.' (I.3.1). Fittingly, Calvin titles the third chapter in Book I, 'The Knowledge Of God Naturally Implanted In The Human Mind.' This natural sense of God we call the *sensus Divinitatis*, a 'sense of the Divine.'



The John Calvin Museum (Musée Jean Calvin), located on the site of his birth house in Noyon, France.

But if God has imbued all humans with such a natural knowledge of him, why then are there atheists and unbelievers? Calvin's answer is that, while many people may live as though there is no God, nevertheless, 'the worm of conscience, keener than burning steel, is gnawing them within.' (I.3.3). In short, created humans deny God because they ignore Him through their hardness of heart. And this hardness of heart is born of *sin*. Even so, a natural sense of God's reality cannot be completely extinguished in any person:

For the world labours as much as it can to shake off all knowledge of God, and corrupts his worship in innumerable ways. I only say, that, when the stupid hardness of heart, which the wicked eagerly court as a means of despising God, becomes enfeebled, the sense of Deity, which of all things they wished most to be extinguished, is still in vigour, and now and then breaks forth. Whence we infer, that this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget, though many, with all their might, strive to do so. (I.3.3).

Humanity's innate knowledge of God is corrupted by sin such that it fails to acknowledge its own natural state. Indeed, Calvin suggests earlier in the *Institutes* that unhappiness—coming to recognize one's own misery and spiritual poverty—is the initial key to the breaking forth of the Spirit's activity in one's life. This is ultimately the *sine qua non* of true knowledge of God, leading to salvation (I.1.1).

Calvin's appeal to the *sensus Divinitatis* is not, however, an appeal to a natural *saving* knowledge of God. This, as well shall see shortly, comes only from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, coupled with the external revelation of the Biblical message. Romans 1:18-32 figures heavily in Calvin's treatment of the *sensus Divinitatis* throughout chapters 3-9 of Book I. He appeals to St. Paul's assertion that, '...that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse' (Rom 1:19-20, NASB). This is more a vindication of God's justice in punishing those who do not worship and adore Him since, what knowledge of God they do possess, is thought to be sufficient for *judgment* to the extent that, morally-speaking, humans prefer atheism or idolatry to a Holy God. Calvin labours the point that humanity is without excuse. Though God has made himself plain to all people, and regularly instils new awareness of his Being into us, we have instead chosen a different, deeply-unnatural path.

Calvin's *sensus Divinitatis*, then, is more a convicting animal than a saving grace. It is precisely because humans have this sense that they are justly and condignly judged for not honouring their Creator. Its positive side, however, is that the misery this constant state engenders can, and often is, used of the Spirit of God to spurn one on toward seeking the truth of Biblical revelation. To recognize one's own misery is a sign of the transformative in-breaking of the Spirit.

Accommodation(ism)

In the centuries preceding Calvin, it was common—especially among the Scholastics—to affirm the doctrine of *analogy* in reference to human knowledge of God. Analogical predication was defended chiefly by Thomas Aquinas in the first book of his *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas reasoned that, while perfect (*univocal*) knowledge of the infinite God by finite humans was manifestly impossible, it would also be absurd to posit simply a muddled, confused, or flatly erroneous knowledge (*equivocal*). Thus, knowledge of God was thought to be somewhere in between these extremes, that is, *analogical*. Perhaps the easiest way to think of the doctrine of analogy is simply in terms of similarity and dissimilarity, that is, two analogates are partly the same and partly different. Analogates share a common 'perfection,' but exemplify that perfection differently depending on what they are (i.e., their *ontology*). True knowledge is communicated through analogy, but it is limited and incomplete.

Calvin, and the Reformers after him, never spoke explicitly against the Thomistic doctrine of analogy, but Calvin did proffer his own conception of knowledge of the Divine which does not make appeal to it. Like Luther, Calvin was generally not accustomed to philosophizing deeply about such matters. His theory, then, much less complex than that of Aquinas, is often referred to as the *accommodation theory* or *accommodationism*.

Accommodation refers 'to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wishes to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being.'³

³ Dowey, *op cit.*, p. 3.

Calvin's well known description of the nature of revelatory language likens the Divine discourse with humanity to a kind of 'baby talk'. Indeed, God, in speaking to us, even through Scripture, 'lisps': 'God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children . . . Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness.' (1.13.1). For Calvin, created humans—in virtue of their bare creatureliness—simply *cannot* know God 'as he is in himself' but only as he is 'in *relation* to us.' (1.10.2). This is to say that God discloses Himself to humanity in accord with his causal-relationality with them and condescends to the limited capacity of the human mind to give us a picture of who He is as our Creator. This is in keeping with Calvin's frequent insistence that we know God only as he reveals himself to us, that is, in the context of the Divine-human relationship, not as God is *in himself*.

The question to be asked, according to Calvin, is not 'What is God' (*quid sit Deus*), but 'What is God like?' (*qualis sit Deus*) and what is appropriate to ask about His nature?⁴ Indeed, for Calvin, 'If God is truly like He is portrayed in Scripture, that is, the God who cares actively for his creation and who therefore deserves man's *pietas* and *religio*, then such a question as "What is God?" betrays a complete lack of knowledge of God, apart from being unlawful curiosity about God's essence and majesty.'⁵

God communicates with us by accommodating to our finitude and frailty. Calvin was well aware that the Bible uses many different sorts of analogies and metaphors in describing God which some might erroneously construe to be either univocal or equivocal. But, for Calvin, the analogies employed in Scripture are not just *any* analogies. They are divinely *chosen* and, conversely, humans are *designed* to be the recipients of them so that, even though limited, true knowledge is nevertheless transferred. B. A. Gerrish observes that, for Calvin, 'God does not merely condescend to human frailty by revealing himself in the prophetic and apostolic word and by causing the Word to be written down in sacred books: he also makes his witness employ accommodated expressions.'⁶ These 'expressions' are the very vehicles by which God imparts knowledge to us. Insisting upon perfect knowledge of God's infinite being (univocal predication) would not only be to demand something which we cannot—by our very nature—have, but would also be to derogate the inestimable value that which the Creator *has* condescended to impart to us.

The use of anthropomorphism and metaphor in Scripture also plays a key role in Calvin's understanding of accommodation. He criticized the 'Anthropomorphites' who 'dreamed of a corporeal God, because mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet, are often ascribed to him . . .' (1.13.1). This was a hyper-literal reading of Scripture (still often found among many today!). To Calvin, the folly of such a position is plain and the evidence of accommodation to our limited understanding is clearly evident. The Scriptures, for example, plainly teach that God is spirit (Jn. 4:24) which by nature precludes such a literal rendering of anthropomorphism. Human beings, however, cannot possibly understand all that it means to be an

⁴ Parker, *Calvin*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays of the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 175.

eternal, self-existent, *personal* Spirit. God, however, gives us a mode for *apprehending* His being even though we cannot fully *comprehend* it. *Finitum non capax infinitum*, 'the finite cannot contain the infinite.' Nevertheless, *finitum posse apprehensio infinitum*, 'the finite can apprehend the infinite.'

Calvin's theory of accommodated language permits a multifaceted understanding of God's self-disclosure in which we understand it to be constituted of 'sign-posts' along the way to the person of God, but ones which never exhaust His being or provide a total understanding. As Calvin says, 'but all the signs he ever employed were in apt accordance with the scheme of doctrine, and, at the same time, gave plain intimation of his incomprehensible essence.' (I.11.3). Scripture, in this manner, can be unified in contrast to those conceptions of Divine 'speech' which lead either to hyper-literalism, or unfettered relativism. Calvin's accommodationism affirms that we have a word from God, but reminds us that God is using a chosen means to describe himself in the context of his relationship to us as Creator. God 'stoops far below his proper height' (I.13.1), condescending to speak to us in the human words we were created to employ, in order that he may become *relationally* near to us.

Scripture

As we've seen, the *sensus Divinitatis* imparts a certain 'natural' knowledge of God. But, for Calvin, this knowledge is at once obscured, incomplete, and most importantly, *insufficient*. Indeed, such knowledge only serves to make humans inexcusable before God. That is, natural knowledge is inherently condemnatory and non-salvific. Therefore, Calvin contends that the only saving knowledge of God is to be found in the particular, special revelation of God through Scripture. In this regard, Calvin deploys his famous 'spectacles metaphor' in which Scripture interprets nature and existence for us, while revealing the true God:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God (I.6.1).

The sole manner in which human beings may come to a right view of God and religion is to 'put on' the spectacles of Scripture. Once the Biblical spectacles are adorned, the broader picture comes into focus. Again, Scripture supplies what general revelation cannot: 'It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective' (I.6.3).

Calvin's doctrine of Scripture included the notion of Divine inspiration, built upon the Bible's apostolic authority which enjoins 'with unmistakable marks and tokens the one true God' (I.6.2). The apostles did not write 'except from the Lord, that is, with Christ's Spirit as precursor in a certain measure dictating their words [*Verba quodammodo dictante Christi Spiritu*] (IV.8.8). The newer McNeill-

Battles translation notes that the adverb *quodammodo* (meaning, 'in a certain way,' 'in a manner,' or, more colloquially, 'so to speak'), is a deliberate modifier of *dictante* ('to dictate') which would preclude a construal—from Calvin's use of the word 'dictating'—any theory of mechanical dictation, or even technical, *verbal inerrancy*. Rather, the context is wholly didactic, that is, the Scripture bears the apostolic authority to teach the Divine subject.⁷

Calvin adds that the apostles 'were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit [*certi et authentici Spiritus sancti amanuenses*], and their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God; but the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scriptures' (IV.8.9). Again, the McNeill-Battles translation notes that *amanuenses* (literally 'by hand,' but typically used to describe something akin to secretarial work), is also not indicative of plenary, verbal inspiration, but of didactic authority.⁸ Nowhere does Calvin explicitly defend a theory of mechanical dictation. Rather, his point is simply that the Scripture alone is imbued with the authority to teach about the things of God and right religion.

Calvin frequently asserts humans to be the spectators of the theatre of God's glory (*theatrum gloriae Dei*) (I.6.2), but must heed the Scriptures to really behold it: 'Therefore, however fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theatre to be a spectator of them, it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word, the better to profit' (I.6.2). Believers must attend to the Divine Word in order to clearly see the fuller revelation of the Creator.

Lastly, Calvin argues that the knowledge of God which comes through the authority of Scripture, is a knowledge shared only by believers when they regard the Scripture to have 'sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard' (I.7.1). Here, Calvin is arguing against the notion that the Bible gleans its authority through any pronouncement of the institutional church. In accord with the Reformational principle of *sola Scriptura*, Calvin guards against the idea that the Bible has authority outside of itself. Rather, it is self-authenticating (*autopiston*): 'Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated' (I.7.5). This statement shores up the notion of both regenerating faith which engenders *pietas* and *religio* and, in turn, opens up the knowledge of God through Scripture to the believing community.

The Text: Our reading comes from Calvin's *Institutes*, Book I, chapters 1-7. Though the entirety of Book I is devoted to the knowledge of God, these initial chapters summarize well Calvin's overall view of both humanity's natural knowledge of God (chs 1-5), but the ultimate need of Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit to truly know and love God (chs. 6-7).

⁷ See *Calvin: Institutes*, John McNeill (ed.), (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. 1155, note 7.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1157, note 9.

Further Reading

Edward A. Downey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 3rd edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Donald McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*. Reprint of 1963 edition: Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987.

Questions for consideration

1. What does Calvin understand the primary function and purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* to be?
2. How might we compare Calvin's doctrine of accommodation with Aquinas' doctrine of analogy?
3. Of Calvin's threefold sources for the knowledge of God, which is the most crucial for him? Why?