

Lecture 9 – “Knowledge of God & Ourselves”: The Theology of John Calvin

“The histories of all past times” are “a true school on how to regulate our life,” but sacred history is superior because it lays down “general principles by which we may examine every other history” and because it displays more clearly “what should be imitated and what avoided.” John Calvin

“O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out.” Romans 11:33

Prayer

Prayer following Calvin’s sermon on 1 Samuel 2

“Let us therefore bow before the majesty of our good God,
 Recognizing the great number of faults and offenses
 With which we have provoked His wrath against us.
 Let us pray to Him that He may etch the fear of His majesty
 Upon our minds and make us sharers in those things
 That we have learned in [the] Scripture,
 That by His strength He may support our weakness and infirmity,
 And make us victors by the power of His Spirit,
 And provide sufficient strength for us to withstand any temptations
 To which we would otherwise be unequal,
 And run the whole course of our lives in obedience to Him,
 Giving eternal thanks to Him for His many and great benefits to us;
 Finally, that all our senses may be lifted up in worshiping Him
 To His everlasting praise and glory,
 And we may be led in the pathway of salvation,
 Not for our own private advantage
 But for the upbuilding of our neighbors. Amen.”

“Knowledge of God & Ourselves”: The Theology of John Calvin

Institutes of the Christian Religion (1539)

John T. McNeill: Calvin’s *Institutes* “holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected the course of history” (Introduction to the McNeill-Battles edition of the *Institutes*, xxix.)

Alister McGrath: “The intellectual domination of Protestantism by theologians of the Reformed tradition is due to both the substance and structure of Calvin’s final edition of the *Institutes*” (*A Life of John Calvin*, 139-40).

I. Growth of a Book

A. From the “little booklet” of 1536 to four books and 80 chapters of 1559

B. Not revised but expanded

1. Study of the church fathers—Chrysostom, Bernard of Clairvaux, and especially Augustine
2. Ministry at Strassburg and Geneva
3. Study of the Scripture
 - a. Commentaries on most of the books of the Old and New Testaments
 - b. Accuracy, clarity, brevity, humility
 - c. Calvin concerning his writings on Scripture

Commentary on Romans: God limits our knowledge “first that we should be kept humble and also that we should continue to have dealings with our

fellows.” “The majesty [of the Word of God] is somehow diminished...if we do not interpret it with great discretion and moderation.”

1544 Treatise: “God has given me grace to write what I have written as faithfully as it was in my power. I have not falsified a single passage of the Scripture, nor given it a wrong interpretation to the best of my knowledge...and always aimed at simplicity.”

Karl Barth: “How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to rethink the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent” (*Church Dogmatics* 1/1, 16-17).

Alister McGrath: “The origins of Calvin’s methods as perhaps the greatest biblical commentator of his age lie in his study of law in the advanced atmosphere of Orleans and Bourges. There is every indication that he learned from Budé the need to be a competent philologist, to approach a foundational text directly, to interpret it within the linguistic and historical parameters of its context, and to apply it to the needs of the present day” (*A Life of John Calvin*, 59).

C. And re-arranged

Illustration: Providence and predestination treated together until the 1559 edition. There providence appears in book 1 (God the Creator) and predestination in book 3 (The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ). Now it answers the question, “Where did my salvation come from?”

II. Characteristics of the *Institutes*

A. Biblical

1. Priority of Scripture

Ford Lewis Battles: Calvin is “a scriptural theologian first, and a user of philosophy, logic, rhetoric—all human tools of organization—only second” (*Analysis*, 19).

2. Use of Scripture

John T. McNeill: “His readiness in bringing scripture passages to bear upon each point of argument is astonishing, and has perhaps never been surpassed” (Introduction to the McNeill-Battles edition of the *Institutes*, lix).

R. C. Reed: Calvin “was a wholesale plagiarist, from Moses and David, Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jesus and John, Peter and Paul” (*The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, 14).

B. Systematic

“As systematiser...he makes his greatest demand on our admiration and gratitude” (B. B. Warfield, “John Calvin the Theologian,” 22)

1. Not “iron-clad logic” but a concern for orderly arrangement

2. Respects the “limits” of Scripture (“learned ignorance”)

Alexander Smellie: Calvin’s *Institutes* “is a great book. It is great in its constructive power. It welds into a unity things which before had stood apart in isolation, unrelated and alone. Athanasius had preached the mystery of the Incarnation, God manifest in flesh. Augustine had dwelt on the dark fact of original sin and the bright fact of redeeming grace. Anselm had gloried in the atonement of the Cross as a satisfaction to divine justice and holy law. But Calvin saw their mutual relations and their organic connection with each other. He felt, also, that all of them were required in Christian faith and experience. He brought them together, so that they were separate no longer; and that is an incalculable gain to the Church of Christ” (*The Reformation in its Literature*, 159).

C. Devotional

1. *Summa pietatis*—“the whole sum of piety and whatever it is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation” (1536 sub-title)

2. Words near the beginning of the final (1559) edition—“Unless [we] establish our complete

- happiness in [God], we will never give [ourselves] truly and sincerely to Him” (1,2,1)
3. Goal is worship—doctrine of God (1,5,9), election (3,21,1), Lord’s Supper (4,17,7)
- Jean Cadier: “I am thinking of the man who said to me a short time ago as he came out of a lecture, ‘I have just been converted through reading the *Institutes*.’ And when I asked him to tell me what exactly had been the message which had effected this transformation, in his life, he replied: ‘I learned from reading Calvin that all the worries about health and about the uncertain future which had hitherto dominated my life were without much importance and that the only things that counted were obedience to the will of God and a care for His glory” (*The Man God Mastered*, 178).

D. Practical

1. Calvin’s *Institutes* were written “not in an ivory tower, but against the background of teething troubles.” (Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 72)
2. “Street corner” theologian
3. The principle of accommodation
 - a. Scripture “proceeds at the pace of a mother stooping to her child, so to speak, so as not to leave us behind in our weakness.” (3,21,4)
 - b. “We must, therefore, consider what questions each is able to bear, and accommodate our doctrine to the capacity of the individual.” (*Commentary on Romans 14:1*)

Questions from Class

- Where should one start reading in the *Institutes*?
- Why did Calvin put sanctification before justification?
- Did Calvin ever make any changes in the Geneva Confession?
- Was the doctrine of election distinctive to Calvin in his time?

For Further Study

- **Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (1986) and *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (1993), T. H. L. Parker
- **Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles. See Introduction by McNeill, xxix-lxxi.
- **The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, R. C. Reed
Fine, small book on Calvin’s teaching by a 19th-century Southern Presbyterian seminary professor.
- **Calvin and Augustine*, B. B. Warfield
Warfield on Calvin is about as good as it gets.
- **Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, Francois Wendel
Best full study of Calvin’s theology.
- **A Life of John Calvin*, Alister McGrath
Contains an excellent short summary of the *Institutes*.

- A. Read the Geneva Confession by William Farel and John Calvin from *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Westminster, 1954), 26-33. Soon after Calvin’s arrival in Geneva for the first time, he and Farel prepared the Confession of Faith for “the citizens and inhabitants of Geneva.” It was written in 1536, the same year in which the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* was published (and followed the same plan).
- *Compare the beginnings of the Genevan Confession and the Augsburg Confession. Look back over the entire Augsburg Confession. Where do the Geneva Confession and the Augsburg Confession agree? Where do they disagree?
 - *What is the “Reformed principle” as set forth in article 1?
 - *Would you say that the Geneva Confession is Christ-centered?
 - *What is missing (surprisingly) in this confession?

*Do you see any underlying theme or emphasis in the Geneva Confession?

*Note article 21. Why is Calvin so anxiously conservative on this issue? Do you think that this article can be followed by modern Christians?

B. Calvin is famous for his teaching on predestination, but much of what he presents can be found in Luther and in Augustine (and some would maintain, in Paul). But Calvin does leave his own mark on his treatment of the doctrine, as is evident from his sermon “Election: The Ground and Source of the Christian Life” on Ephesians 1:3-4. Calvin was not put off by the difficulty of the doctrine nor by its controversial nature; election is part of the teaching of the Bible, he held, and, therefore, must not only be believed but must be preached. But he taught (as in the *Institutes*) that great care must be exercised in presenting it. First, Calvin emphasizes the purpose of the doctrine: to eliminate any possibility of appeal to “merit on man’s part”; to elevate God’s “pure goodness and grace”; and to assure the believer of his or her salvation. Second, Calvin attempts to stay close to the Scripture and avoids speculation. For example, note Calvin’s answer to the question: Why does God choose some and not others? Reflect on the following questions as you read:

*How does Calvin find assurance of salvation in the doctrine of election?

*Often decretal theology (based on the secret will of God) is set over against christocentric theology (based on the Gospel as offered in Christ). Which of these approaches does Calvin follow in this sermon?

*Note the two striking images of Christ on page 98—“the mirror” and “the true register.” What does Calvin mean by these?

*Having treated at length the question—Why are we saved?—Calvin turns to a closely related question—To what end or purpose are we saved. What is his (and Paul’s!) answer?