

John Calvin

On the Doctrine of Divine Revelation

By W. Gary Crampton, Th.D.

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin (1509–1564)¹ was born and raised in Picardy, France. He studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood at the University of Paris, receiving a Master of Arts degree in 1528. Following this, at the advice of his father, he took up the study of law, and earned the doctorate of law in 1531. Somewhere between 1532 and 1534, John Calvin became a Christian. In his own words: “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.”² After his conversion, Calvin committed himself to the study of and the exposition of the Scriptures. *Sola Scriptura* was for him the way of life. The power of the Word of God overwhelmed the Reformer. Later, in his *Institutes*, he wrote:

Now this power which is peculiar to Scripture is clear from the fact that of human writings, however artfully polished, there is none capable of affecting us at all comparably. Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle and any others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them this sacred reading [Scripture]. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigor as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that the sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breath something divine (I.8.1).³

In this article we will study John Calvin’s doctrine of divine revelation. We will see that his view of Scripture was at the center of all that he thought, wrote, and practiced. Ronald Wallace said it this way: “Calvin’s work—and his approach to it—can be fully understood only

when we comprehend also the constraint in which he found himself under the Word of God; for it was his experience of the Word, and his interpretation of it, which determined what he attempted and achieved.”⁴ In his own words, Calvin wrote: “I am one, to whom the law of my heavenly Master is so dear that the cause of no man on earth will induce me to flinch from maintaining it with a pure conscience.”⁵ His symbol was an outstretched hand holding a burning heart, offered up to God; his motto: “My heart, O Lord, I offer as a sacrifice to God—promptly and sincerely.”⁶ The Reformer’s lifetime commitment to a high view of Scripture is recognizable in his deathbed utterance: “As for my doctrine, I have taught faithfully . . . and I have not corrupted one single passage of Scripture nor twisted it so far as I know.”⁷

As we investigate the Reformer’s doctrine of Holy Writ, we will see that his beliefs are very much in conformity with the later Westminster Standards, specifically the *Westminster Assembly’s Confession of Faith* (1647) and the *Larger Catechism* (1648) and the *Shorter Catechism* (1648).

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1. A large portion of this article is taken, with permission, from W. Gary Crampton, *What Calvin Says* (The Trinity Foundation, 2002).
2. John Calvin, *Commentaries*, Volumes I–XXII (Baker, 1981), “Preface” to the *Commentary* on the Psalms.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960).
4. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation* (Baker and Scottish Academic Press, 1990) vii.
5. Cited in Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 300.
6. Cited in F. Nigel Lee, *John Calvin: True Presbyterian* (Jesus Lives, 1981) 20.
7. Cited in John H. Gerstner, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Zondervan, 1980) 393.

CALVIN ON KNOWLEDGE

John Calvin began his theological masterpiece, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with the following words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern” (I.1.1). Without a knowledge of oneself, there is no knowledge of God. But to know one’s self, and the whole of creation in general, there must first be a knowledge of God. God is known both better, and before, oneself or anything else (I.1.1–3). According to the Geneva Reformer, God—not one’s self or the world—is the object best known to man.

Calvin began his *Institutes* with epistemology (the theory of knowledge); he did not begin with how we know there is a god, and then go on to attempt to prove that this god is the God of the Bible. Calvin’s starting point was revelation. The doctrine of God follows epistemology (I.13–18). In his theological and philosophical system, Scripture is foundational. It is “the Word of God” (I.7.1). As far removed as the creature is from his Creator, nevertheless, God accommodates Himself to our human capacity, and speaks to us in His Word.⁸ Therein God “lisps” to us; He speaks to us “in mean and lowly words” (I.13.1; I.8.1). “Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know” (III.21.3).

John Calvin was saying nothing more than the apostle Paul taught and the Westminster Assembly confirmed.⁹ In the words of Paul: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17, NKJV). And in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.6) we read:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and

8. Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Baker, 1984) 21–42.

9. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* begins with the chapter called “Of the Holy Scripture.” The remaining 32 chapters are erected on the axiom of Biblical revelation. Citations from the *Confession* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* are taken from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

10. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel C. Craig (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956, 1980) 117.

necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added.

This is the Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura*, which affirms the all-sufficiency of Scripture. According to this principle, there is no two-source theory of knowledge. The Bible is sufficient for all the truth we need and all the knowledge we can have. True knowledge, said the Reformer, “is that which is delivered in the Law and the Prophets” (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 44:1–7). Our knowledge is “confined within its [Scripture’s] limits” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 8:20).

In the *Institutes*, Calvin maintained that there is a two-fold revelation of God to man: general (I.3–5) and special (I.6–12). The former is general in audience (all mankind) and limited in content; the latter is more restricted in audience (those who read the Bible) and much more detailed in content. Special revelation is now found in Scripture alone. Even though general and special revelation are in perfect harmony (I.10.1), due to its limited nature, general revelation must always be interpreted in light of special revelation (I.6.1).

GENERAL REVELATION

Calvin taught that God had implanted an innate knowledge of Himself (*sensus deitatis*) in all men, a knowledge that is propositional and ineradicable. “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct,” he contended, “an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God Himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of His divine majesty” (*Institutes* I.3.1). Man, as the image bearer of God, even has the moral law imprinted in his heart: It is “engraved upon the hearts of all [and] in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.... It has been engraven by God in the minds of men” (II.8.1; IV.20.16). B. B. Warfield correctly maintained that for Calvin the “innate *sensus deitatis* in man [lies] at the root of all his knowledge of God.” Here man has in-born propositional and ineradicable general revelation.¹⁰

This innate knowledge, taught Calvin, enables man to see the rich revelation of God in creation:

Men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see Him. Indeed, His essence is incomprehensible; hence, His divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon His individual works He has engraven unmistakable marks of His glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the

excuse of ignorance.... Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern some sparks of His glory.... There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare His wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them (*Institutes* I.5.1–2).

All men, therefore, have an awareness of God which leaves them without excuse. Nevertheless, due to the noetic effects of sin, fallen man, even though he possesses this seed of true religion, continually suppresses the knowledge which he has and knows to be true:

But although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, all excuse is cut off because the fault of the dullness is within us. And, indeed, we are not allowed thus to pretend ignorance without our conscience itself always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude (*Institutes* I.5.15).

Without the “spectacles” of special revelation sinful man is not able to come to a sound and saving knowledge of God. “We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from His works, while these very works are appraised not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth” (I.6.1, 3). The testimony of general revelation is “such as that it made men without excuse, and yet was not sufficient to salvation” (*Commentary* on Acts 14:17). “Although by nature the knowledge of God is engraven on the hearts of all men, yet it is so confused and dark, and entangled by many errors, that, if the light of the Word be not added to it, by knowing they know not God, but wander miserably in darkness” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 55:5).

Calvin’s doctrine here is in agreement with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.1):

Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore, it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church; and afterwards, for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against

the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.

“The real relation between general and special revelation, as the matter lay in Calvin’s mind,” wrote Warfield, is “that in the absence of Scripture, that is of special revelation, the general revelation of God is ineffective to preserve any sound knowledge of Him in the world.” Thus, “in these Scriptures alone ... do we possess an adequate revelation of God” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 69, 32.). Special revelation is necessary due to the insufficiency of general revelation.

Although the Geneva Reformer did adhere to a natural or general revelation, and did believe that this is the reason for the universality of religion,¹¹ he did not develop a natural theology, i.e., the theory of evidentialist apologetics that maintains that not only is there a general revelation which God gives to mankind, but also that it is possible for man to develop the true knowledge of God from this general revelation alone.¹² In the *Institutes* (I.3–5), he taught that the innate knowledge that God has implanted in every man, and (because of this) the daily disclosure of God’s attributes in nature are more than sufficient to prove that the God of Scripture is the one and only true God. Calvin spoke of the persuasiveness of the religious and/or moral argument, the cosmological argument, the argument from God’s kind and common dealings with mankind, and the argument from the human anatomy. But unaided by Scripture, these arguments speak in vain. Not even the knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus Christ led the disciples to saving faith; it merely confirmed the faith that they already possessed (II.2.2–5).

Niesel was correct: “The critic who desires to find in Calvin a natural theology encounters [numerous] difficulties.”¹³ Calvin is no natural theologian. “The proofs of faith,” he claimed, “must be [sought at] the mouth of God alone. If we dispute about matters which concern men, then let human reasons take place; but in the doctrine of faith, the authority of God alone must reign, and upon it we must depend” (*Commentary* on Acts 17:2). In other words, one does not attempt to prove God. He is the necessary

11. Calvin taught that “God has sown a seed of religion in all men” (*Institutes* I.4.1).

12. For the opposite view of Calvin and natural theology, see R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Zondervan, 1984) 198–208.

13. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Westminster, 1956) 40.

premise of all proof, the object of knowledge better known than any other. “The best method of seeking God is to begin at His Word” (*Commentary* on Genesis 48:15).

This is not to assert that Calvin was opposed to the use of the evidences for the existence of God. Rather, he believed that they were very useful, even though they do not “prove” the existence of God. First, the evidences are useful in strengthening the faith of Christians, arousing them to worship God with greater reverence and encouraging their hope of eternal life (*Institutes* I.5.10). And second, the evidences can be used in an *ad hominem* (“to the man”) fashion to reveal the foolishness of non-Christian systems, pointing the gainsayer to the one true and living God (I.5.1–9).

SPECIAL REVELATION

John Calvin taught that the propositional truth of special revelation was necessary if one is going to come to a sound and saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. General revelation reveals God as Creator; Scripture alone reveals Him as Savior (*Commentary* on Romans 1:16–17). He wrote:

Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds [innate knowledge], having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift [special revelation], where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens His own most hallowed lips. Not only does He teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows Himself as the God upon whom they are to look.... God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom He has been pleased

14. Technically speaking, “internal evidences” are not evidences at all in the empirical sense; they are a part of special revelation. Only external evidences (extra-Biblical evidences) are actually “evidences” in the empirical sense.

15. B. B. Warfield might take issue with this statement (*Calvin and Augustine*, 29–130), as would Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley (*Classical Apologetics*, 198–208). They would maintain that Calvin thought of the evidences (*indicia*) as working together with the testimony of the Holy Spirit; thus, Calvin would use them as inductive arguments. The problem here is that all inductive arguments are formal logical fallacies. Even in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, man was dependent on propositional revelation for knowledge. He could not, by observation, have determined where he was or what he was to do. God had to tell him then, and the present situation, exacerbated by sin, is worse. For example, in his *Commentary* on Exodus 4:5, Calvin asserted that miracles, as a Biblical evidence, are used, “sometimes ... as preparatives to faith, sometimes for its confirmation.” They can be used to “open a door of faith.” But they are only to be presented as the biblical evidences of the God of Scripture, and never as proof. For

to give useful instruction, because He foresaw that His likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective.... We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from His works” (*Institutes* I.6.1, 3).

True knowledge, said Calvin, “is that which is delivered to us by the law and prophets” (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 44:1–7).

The Geneva Reformer maintained that Scripture is self-authenticating and self-evident. “Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture is indeed self-authenticating” (*Institutes* I.7.5). Metaphorically speaking, “Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste” (I.7.2). There are, he claimed, a number of evidences, both internal¹⁴ and external, that the Bible is God’s inspired, infallible, inerrant revelation to mankind. There is the antiquity of the Bible, the majesty of its style, the heavenliness of the doctrine, the logical consistency of Scripture, the various miracles and prophecies, and the faithfulness of the martyrs (I.8.3–13). But apart from the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, these evidences are “vain”; they are “secondary aids to our feebleness” (I.8.13; I.7.1–5).

Calvin would have been in agreement with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.4–5):

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.... We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Calvin did not attempt to prove by extra-Biblical arguments that the Bible is the Word of God.¹⁵ He wrote:

They mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our day?... Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to Him (*Institutes* I.7.1).

Therefore, it is “not right to subject it [the Bible] to proof and reasoning” (I.7.5). The Bible is the axiom on which all knowledge and proof are based. “Unless this certainty, higher and stronger than any human judgment, be present, it will be vain to fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps. For unless this foundation is laid its authority will always remain in doubt” (I.8.1).

Calvin is not anti-logic. Philip Schaff claimed that as the best theologian and exegete of the Reformation period, John Calvin “never abused reason ... but assigned it the office of an indispensable handmaid of revelation.”¹⁶ Whereas Calvin favored the study of logic as a discipline, what he opposed was human thinking that is unaided by the teaching of Scripture (*Institutes* I.15.6; I.5.14). Church historian Gregg Singer confirmed this. According to Singer, although Calvin never wrote much on philosophy, he nevertheless did advocate the legitimacy and necessity of a Biblical philosophy. In fact, he laid the groundwork for a solid Reformed Christian philosophy based solely on the Word of God.¹⁷ Niesel was of the same opinion: “The aim of Calvin's theology ... [is] to interpret those fundamental principles of Christian philosophy which God has granted us in the Bible” (Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 24).

Sadly, Calvinists have often been characterized as being too logical, rather than anti-logical. The Geneva Reformer would have agreed with the Westminster theologians who averred that a man seeking the office of minister of the Gospel should be trained and examined, not only regarding his skills in the original languages of “the Hebrew and Greek Testaments,” but also “whether he has skill in logic and philosophy.”¹⁸

Calvin taught that even though there is a common ground between believers and non-believers due to the fact that they are all created in the image of God, there are no notions common to Christianity and non-Christian philosophy and theology (*Institutes* I.5.13).

True faith rests alone on an implicit belief in the Word of God, as revealed by the Holy Spirit (III.2.6–10). Calvin said that evidentialist apologetics is “doing things backward” (I.7.4).

Every human being has an innate and inescapable knowledge of God because God has chosen to reveal Himself to His image bearer. This knowledge is not derived by either sensation or unaided reasoning (*Commentary* on Acts 8:31). Such knowledge is revelational and propositional, and it has its source in the God of Holy Scripture. Further, taught the Reformer, Jesus Christ is the eternal *Logos* who makes all knowledge possible. Christ makes all men aware of God because He is “the true light which gives light to every man coming into the world” (*Commentary* on John 1:9, 15).

CALVIN ON SCRIPTURE

The All-Sufficiency of Scripture

As we have seen, John Calvin was an advocate of *sola Scriptura*. He believed, as taught by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.6):

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Calvin's voluminous writings—commentaries, sermons, and catechisms—fully attest to this fact. Scripture to the Geneva Reformer is “the Word of God,” which comes to us from “the mouth of God” (*Institutes* I.7.1, 5). And “when the Lord closes His holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may not go farther” (*Commentary* on Romans 9:14).¹⁹ “I do not venture to make

more on this, see Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (The Trinity Foundation, 1989) and Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1995).

16. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans, 1910) VII.32.

17. C. Gregg Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits* (A Press, 1989) 52–55; see also Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 99–104.

18. “The Form of Presbyterian Church Government and of Ordination of Ministers,” in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 412–413.

19. Calvin's comment here on Romans 9:14, that we should not go beyond that which God has revealed, has to do with the doctrine of predestination, but it is applicable to any subject.

any assertion,” he commented, “where Scripture is silent” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 6:2).

Note is made here that Calvin and the Westminster Assembly did not restrict the truth of special revelation to the explicit propositions of the Scriptures, i.e., that which has been “expressly set down in Scripture.” Those things which are implicitly taught by these propositions, i.e., that which “by good and necessary consequence may be [logically] deduced from Scripture,” are also God’s truth. In the words of Calvin: “The commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed [explicitly] in words.... Therefore, plainly a sober interpretation of the law goes beyond the [explicit] words” to the implications taught in those explicit words. For example, “the purpose of the fifth commandment is that honor ought to be paid,” not just to one’s father and mother, but “to those to whom God has assigned it” as well (*Institutes* II.8.8).

We have also noted that Calvin taught that Scripture is necessary for salvation. Sin is so pervasive in fallen man that God’s general revelation is continually suppressed. If men were taught only by general revelation, “they would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown God” (*Institutes* I.5.12). Thus, God has given us His Word, as “spectacles” to direct us to Jesus Christ the Savior (I.6.1). According to Calvin, the Holy Spirit is the effectual agent, which united with the Word, as the instrumental, objective factor, gives light to a sin-darkened mind (II.2.20). “Indeed, the Word of God is like the sun,” he wrote, “shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly, it cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through His illumination makes entry for it” (III.2.34).²⁰ The Reformer’s view is that of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 31): “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel.” The Holy Spirit causes the sinner to believe what he reads in the Gospel.

The Word of God is also that sole source of knowledge

20. In his *Institutes* (III.2.15), Calvin refers to this new ability to see the truth of God’s Word as “our truly feeling its sweetness” (*sensus suavitatis*), and “experiencing it in ourselves.” See Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit in the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (P & R Publishing, 2003) 54.

21. Cited in *Table Talk*, edited by Robert F. Ingram (Ligonier Ministries, March 1991) 10.

through which man is to interpret the world. Scripture is all-sufficient. It is not only that which reveals Jesus Christ as Savior, it is also the one and only guide for the Christian’s life (*Institutes* I.6.1–2). “Everything that relates to the guidance of our life is contained in them [the Scriptures] abundantly” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 30:1). Calvin’s high view of Scripture is particularly evident in his refutation of certain anti-Trinitarian heresies of his day:

Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. And let us not take into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in His sacred Word, or to think anything about Him that is not prompted by His Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word. But if some distinction does exist in the one divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit—something hard to grasp—and occasions to certain minds more difficulty and trouble than is expedient, let it be remembered that men’s minds, when they indulge their curiosity, enter into a labyrinth. And so let them yield themselves to be ruled by the heavenly oracles [Scripture], even though they may fail to capture the height of the mystery.²¹

Progressive Revelation

The Geneva Reformer held that Biblical revelation was progressive in nature. He taught that there is a continuously enlarging body of special revelation from the time of Adam in the Garden of Eden to the time of the apostles. In Eden, God first revealed Himself to Adam in propositions and He continued to do so until the close of the canon of Scripture. Throughout the entirety of the progress of revelation, the revelation is inerrant at every stage (*Commentary* on Hebrews 1:1–2; *Institutes* I.6.2). Wrote Calvin:

The first promise of salvation was given to Adam.... There it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illuminated the whole earth (II.10.20).

This is the same doctrine as taught in the *Westminster Confession* (1.1): “Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church.”

The Biblical doctrine of progressive revelation, as taught by the Reformer, holds that God has seen fit to give special revelation little by little over the centuries of time: some to Adam, more to Noah, more to Abraham, more to Moses, more to David, and so forth, until the coming of the New Covenant. The Old Testament pointed beyond itself to the coming of Christ and the New Testament age. But until this new era arrived, revelation was incomplete (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 31:31–34).

One of the ways that progressive revelation is recognizable in the Bible, maintained Calvin, is in the various covenants which God has instituted and established with His people, both in the Old and New Testaments. The covenant is that which gives unity to the Word of God, and makes the people of God in both covenant eras one people (*Institutes* II.10–11).

In his *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 26:16–19,²² Calvin taught that the only way that man is able to have any relationship with God is that God has chosen to enter into covenant with His creatures. His view is well expressed in the *Westminster Confession* (7.1):

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Although the Genevan does not refer to the initial covenant which God made with Adam as a “covenant of works,” he does recognize Adam's federal headship with the entire human race (*Commentary* on Romans 5:12 and *1 Corinthians* 15:45). It is clear by his writings that he would be in basic agreement with the *Westminster Confession* (7.2), that “the first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”²³ Adam, however, broke covenant with God, and he and his posterity fell from the state of original righteousness (*Commentary* on Romans 5:12).²⁴ Man is now totally depraved. Due to “Adam's sin,” there is “an hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which makes us liable to God's wrath” (*Institutes* II.1.8). Man is in desperate need of a Savior.

With the Fall, however, came a new covenant: the “covenant of grace.” This covenant was instituted in the first messianic promise of *Genesis* 3:15 (“And I [God] will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman,

and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel”), immediately subsequent to the Fall (*Institutes* I.14.18; II.10.20). The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (7.3) explicates the covenant of grace as follows:

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

With this explanation, John Calvin would have been in full agreement. In the covenant of grace, promises were made to Adam and Noah, along with covenant signs (*Institutes* IV.14.6, 18). But the covenant really came into its own with Abraham and his seed (III.21.7; *Commentary* on *Genesis* 12:3; 17:1ff.). Once given to Abraham, this covenant continued to flow through redemptive history, reaching its Old Testament zenith in David, as a type of Christ (*Commentary* on *Psalms* 89:3ff.). And then, having come into its fullest measure with the advent of Christ Himself, the covenant remains as valid for us today as it was to Israel: “It is most evident that the covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people” (*Institutes* IV.16.6).

In the Reformer's thought, there are not two covenants—the Old and the New—in some radical sense. On the contrary, “the covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation” (*Institutes* II.10.2). As stated in the *Westminster Confession* (7.6): “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”

Scripture tells us that the covenant of grace is that which unifies the people of God, in both Testaments. They are all saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Wrote Calvin: The “blessed and happy

22. John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1987).

23. See Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Baker, 2001) 304; and M. Eugene Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 90.

24. See John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959) 17–18.

state of the church [both Old and New Testaments] always had its foundation in the person of Christ”:

The Old Testament was established upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ’s intercession. For the Gospel preaching, too, declares nothing else than that sinners are justified apart from their own merit by God’s fatherly kindness; and the whole of it is summed up in Christ. Who, then, dares to separate the Jews from Christ, since, with them ... was made the covenant of the Gospel, the sole foundation of which is Christ? Who dares to estrange from the gift of free salvation those to whom we hear the doctrine of the righteousness of faith imparted? (*Institutes* II.6.2; II.10.4).

Calvin believed that which is taught in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (8.6), that “although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world.” In Calvin’s own words, “the virtue of the one sacrifice” of Jesus Christ “is eternal and extends to all ages.... Except the sacrifice of Christ was [eternally] efficacious, no one of the [Old Testament] fathers would have obtained salvation” (*Commentary* on Hebrews 9:26).

Therefore, Calvin could write that all of the Old Testament saints, from Adam onward, belonged to the New Covenant in that they embraced Christ, the promised Messiah, by faith alone: “The children of the promise (Romans 9:8), reborn of God, who have obeyed the commands by faith working through love (Galatians 5:6), have belonged to the New Covenant since the world began.... For they believed especially in the Mediator; and they did not doubt that through Him the Spirit was given to them that they might do good, and that they were pardoned whenever they sinned” (*Institutes* II.11.10). “There is always to be presupposed a mutual relation and correspondence between the covenant of God and our faith, in order that the unfeigned consent of the latter may answer to the faithfulness of the former” (*Commentary* on Psalm 78:36–37).

The covenant promise of God to all His elect, covenant children, in both Testaments, is the same: He is their God and they are His people. In this way God has covenanted with all of the elect in Christ: “For the Lord always covenanted with His people thus: ‘I will be your God, and you shall be My people’ (Leviticus 26:12)”

(*Institutes* II.10.8). The perpetuity of the covenant, noted the Reformer, is guaranteed by God in Deuteronomy 5:2ff. (*Sermon* on Deuteronomy 4:44–5:3). In this respect, wrote Parker, “the relationship between the two Testaments could hardly be closer than Calvin saw it.”²⁵

This does not mean that Calvin did not recognize the difference between the two dispensations of the one covenant of grace; he clearly did. The difference, however, was not in “substance and reality,” but “in the mode of dispensation” (*Institutes* II.10.2). The Old Testament promises what the New delivers in Jesus Christ. “Those mysteries which they [the Old Testament people of God] but glimpsed in shadowed outline are manifest to us.” And “the grace of which they bore witness is put before our very eyes. They had but a slight taste of it; we can more richly enjoy it” (II.9.1). The Old Testament “showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance; the New reveals the very substance of truth as present.” The Old became “new and eternal only after it was consecrated and established by the blood of Christ” (II.11.4).

The New Covenant is one of greater realization; it is one of greater power in the Holy Spirit. And in this respect, it is superior (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Hebrews 8:10). As taught in the *Westminster Confession* (19.3), Calvin believed that the Old Testament church was the “church under age,” whereas the New Testament church is the church which has come of age (*Commentary* on Galatians 4:1–5).

The Geneva Reformer, then, did not radically separate the Old and New Testaments. He believed that the Bible is one covenant book, which belongs to the people of God throughout all ages. The same Holy Spirit inspired writers of both Testaments; both are the eternal unchangeable Word of God (*Commentary* on Psalm 119:89 and Isaiah 40:8).

In fact, taught Calvin, the immutable law of God is included in the covenant of grace. The same law which was formerly written on tablets of stone is now written on fleshly hearts. But it is the same law and the same Holy Spirit which does the writing, and the same Holy Spirit is necessary in both Testaments for the illumination of God’s Word to non-believers. The Spirit is the one who gives life to the law (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 31:31–34 and 2 Corinthians 3:1–18). Moreover, in his *Commentary* on Matthew 5:17, Calvin wrote:

God had, indeed, promised a New Covenant at the coming of Christ; but had, at the same time, showed that it would not be different from the first, but that, on the contrary, its design was, to give a perpetual sanction to

25. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 63.

the covenant, which He had made from the beginning with His people. "I will write My law," (says He) "in their hearts, and I will remember their iniquities no more" (Jeremiah 31:31–34). By these words He is so far from departing from the former covenant, that on the contrary, He declares, that it will be confirmed and ratified, when it shall be succeeded by the New. This is also the meaning of Christ's words when He says that He came to fulfill the law: for He actually fulfilled it by quickening with His Spirit the dead letter and then exhibiting with His Spirit the dead letter and then exhibiting, in reality, what had hitherto appeared only in figures.

It is obvious that John Calvin would have roundly endorsed the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* (19.5), that "the moral law does for ever bind all, as well justified and others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it: neither does Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation."

Calvin would have also endorsed the teaching of the Westminster Assembly regarding covenant theology and the sacraments.²⁶ In his *Institutes* (IV.14.1–6) he made it clear that, as stated by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (27.1), both baptism and the Lord's "are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace." Further, Calvin was in full accord with the *Confession* (27.5) that "the sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard to spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New." Jesus Christ, said the Reformer, was promised in the "ancient sacraments" (IV.14.20).

Moreover, in his *Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 10:1–12 he claimed that "the ancient sacraments of the law had the same virtue as ours have at this day.... The reality of the sacraments was presented to the people of God no less than to us." When the Jews ate the Old Testament covenant feast they partook of Christ, for even though:

His flesh did not as yet exist, it was nevertheless, food for them.... The promises given to them shadowed forth the Gospel in such a way, that they had it included in them. Their sacraments served to prefigure ours in such a way that they were nevertheless, even for that period, true sacraments, having a present efficacy.

At the same time that the substance of the sacraments was the same as ours, yet we have a fuller revelation and feasting: "Christ is now presented to us more fully."

Biblical revelation and covenant theology are inseparably tied together in the thinking of John Calvin.

The Close of the Canon

Calvin, along with the later Westminster Assembly, did not adhere to any form of extra-Biblical special revelation. He, with the Westminster theologians, averred that the canon of Scripture was closed at the end of the apostolic age. The extraordinary offices of the first century (apostles, prophets) and the miraculous word gifts which accompanied them (prophecy, tongues, etc.) passed away with the close of the canon (*Sermon on Ephesians* 4:11–12).²⁷ God now speaks authoritatively only in His written Word. In the words of the *Confession* (1.1–2), with the close of the canon, "those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people [has] now ceased." Special revelation is now found only in "the Word of God written, [wherein] are now contained all the [66] books of the Old and New Testaments."

This is precisely the teaching of the Geneva Reformer. When God was pleased "to raise up a more visible form of the church, He willed to have His Word set down and sealed in writing." Once this was done, "every doctrine to be taught should conform to that rule" (*Institutes* IV.8.6). The law, the prophets, and the apostolic writings are "the limits of revelation" (*Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:25). Wrote Calvin:

God will not speak intermittently through some and through others; nor will He add prophecies to prophecies, or revelations to revelations. Rather, He has so fulfilled all functions of teaching in His Son that we must regard this as the final and eternal testimony from Him this way, the whole New Testament time, from the point that Christ appeared to us with the preaching of His Gospel even to the Day of Judgment, is designated "the last hour" ... "the last times" ... "the last days." This is done that, content with the perfection of Christ's teaching, we may learn not to fashion anything new for ourselves beyond this or to admit anything contrived by others.

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be

26. More will be said on the sacraments as a "means of grace" below.

27. John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, 1987). There are some places where at first glance Calvin seems to have another opinion regarding the cessation of the miraculous word gifts. For example, in his *Institutes* IV.3.4, and in his *Commentaries* on Romans 12:6 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, he makes reference to the ongoing gift of prophecy. But when these are studied in their context, and compared to his other writings, it is evident that Calvin spoke of the gift of prophecy, not as receiving new, direct revelation from God, but of the ongoing ministry of the preaching of the Word of God.

held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of His Word (*Institutes* IV.8.7–8).

And in his “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” which introduces the *Institutes*, the Reformer clearly stated that miracles were for the purpose of confirming the message and messenger of special revelation. He wrote: “In demanding miracles of us, they [certain antagonists] act dishonestly. For we are not forging some new Gospel, but are retaining that very Gospel whose truth all the miracles of Jesus Christ and His disciples ever wrought to confirm.” When special revelation ceased, so did the age of miracles.

Calvin’s view is that of the *Westminster Confession* (1.6):

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

The Charismatic camp cannot reasonably claim the Genevan. His basic position was that God does not reveal Himself to man (in special revelation) apart from Scripture. There are no “new revelations of the Spirit,” as claimed by the Charismatics. “Indeed,” averred Calvin, “it is the highest virtue to ask nothing beyond the Word of God” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 7:12). “Let us not be like those fanciful persons who would have God to send them some revelation from heaven, that they might have no need of preaching or reading” the Word of God (*Sermon* on Ephesians 4:11–12). “Fanatics [Charismatics], abandoning Scripture and flying over to [new] revelation, cast down all the principles of godliness” (*Institutes* I.9, title). Wallace rightly commented that in Calvin’s doctrine, “we cannot expect revelation to come through heavenly oracles or private communications or visions or irregular signs, since the days for such modes of communication are long past.”²⁸

28. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Geneva Divinity School, 1953, 1982) 99.

29. *The Confession of Faith* (1.2) lists the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments.

30. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Doubleday, 1994) paragraph 120, and *The Creeds of Christendom* ed. Philip Schaff (Baker, 1983) II.240–242.

The Inspiration of Scripture

All Scripture, said Calvin, “is divinely inspired” (*Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16). He agreed with the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* (1.2), that “under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the [66] books of the Old and New Testaments.... All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.”²⁹ And here he differed with the Roman Catholic Church-State, which avers that the rule of faith and practice for the church is found, not only in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, but also in some of the Apocryphal books; all of which are to be interpreted by the Magisterium of the Roman Church (“Mother Church”).³⁰

As noted above, according to the Genevan, the Old Testament writings and the apostolic documents are the “limits of revelation,” and “those who wander beyond” these limits, “find nothing but the impostures of Satan and ... not the Word of the Lord” (*Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:25). “Everything which is added to the Word must be condemned and rejected.... Everything that is introduced by men on their own authority will be nothing else than a corruption of the Word” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 8:20). Nothing “can be added to them [the Scriptures] without doing grievous injury to the Holy Spirit” (*Commentary* on John 16:13). Roman Catholicism errs, taught Calvin, by sinfully locating “the authority of the church outside God’s Word” (*Institutes* IV.8.13). He concluded:

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church, is by the prescription and standard of the Word (IV.8.8).

Herein we see the Reformer, as noted, in full agreement with the *Westminster Confession* (1.6), that “nothing at any time is to be added” to the 66 books of the Bible, including “the traditions of men,” i.e., the Roman Catholic Church-State. B. B. Warfield said it this way: In the canon of Scripture, Calvin “included all the [39] books of the Old Covenant which were recognized by the Jewish church as of divine gift, and as such handed down to the Christian church; and all the [27] books of the New Covenant which have been given the church by the apostles as its authoritative law-code.... Such, then, are the Scriptures as conceived by Calvin: sixty-six sacred books” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 48, 67).

Moreover, Calvin adamantly denied the necessity of the Magisterium of any church to interpret the Bible for the individual. There is a “clearness” to Scripture, a “guiding light,” wherein every Christian is able to read and understand the Bible (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 1:19). As stated in the *Westminster Confession* (1.7):

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

It is also noteworthy that Calvin disagreed with the teaching of Roman Catholicism that it is the church which has given us the Bible. Rather, said the Genevan, the apostle Paul “testifies that the church is ‘built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles’ (Ephesians 2:20). If the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the foundation, this must have had authority before the church began to exist” (*Institutes* I.7.2). In Calvin’s view, the Bible exercises authority over the church; it is the church which assents to the Bible, not vice-versa. Ronald Wallace commented:

For Calvin the Bible is not only the sole source of church proclamation but also the sole authority that must rule the life of the church.... Through the preaching of the Word of God Christ rules within His church.... This means that the Scripture is set over the church by God as the authority that must be allowed full freedom to rule the life of the church. It must be given a place of unsurped honor within the church. It was through the Word that the church was brought into being; it is through the same Word always being given afresh that the church is continually renewed in its life and preserved as a church (Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 99–100).

According to Calvin, the Bible is the Word of God; it does not become the Word of God, as in Neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodox theology maintains that parts of the Bible subjectively “become” the Word of God—different parts for different hearers at different times; the Bible is not “the Word of God.” Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, two champions of Neo-orthodoxy, taught that the only true revelation of God to man is Jesus Christ (the Word of God incarnate), and when Scripture “reveals” Christ to the reader, then the Bible subjectively

becomes God’s Word. According to Barth and Brunner, it was beneath God, who is “Wholly Other,” to communicate the transcendent Christ through logical propositions. Thus, God reveals events to us in the Bible, but not the meaning of the events. The understanding of the events is a subjective enterprise. Neo-orthodoxy, then, in claiming that revelation is merely an event (i.e., something that happens), denies that the Bible gives us propositional revelation.³¹ In Neo-orthodoxy, the Bible and the Word of God are not one and the same thing. There is also an incompatibility between Christ as the Word of God and the Bible as the Word of God. Further, in Neo-orthodox theology, the Bible contains errors. It was written by fallen men and is full of logical paradoxes (as distinguished from rhetorical paradoxes) and contradictions. Thus, Neo-orthodoxy is called the “Theology of Paradox.”³²

According to John Calvin, such teaching is nonsensical. The Bible teaches propositional truth. Propositions are logical, understandable combinations of words which affirm something. They are the meaning of indicative sentences. The truth of Scripture is not “in between” or “above” or “behind” the words, or only in the mind of the interpreter. Neither are the words secretly symbolic, merely intimating some higher truth. Rather, God’s truth lies in the logical meaning and organization of the words themselves. His truth comes via our understanding of these propositions according to the rules of grammar and logic. Thus, the Bible does not contain logical paradoxes (*Commentary* on Deuteronomy 30:11; *Institutes* I.7.1). “Certainly, wrote Calvin, “no one can be more averse to paradox than I am.”³³

As the *Westminster Confession* (1.5) says, in Scripture there is a “consent of all the parts.” The Bible is logically consistent. Just because something in Scripture might “exceed [our] mental capacity,” said Calvin, does not make it paradoxical. “For our wisdom ought

31. See Robert L. Reymond, *Introductory Studies in Contemporary Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968) 91ff.; Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Zondervan, 1982) 35ff.; and Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (The Trinity Foundation, 1997).

32. R. V. Schnucker, “Neo-orthodoxy,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Baker, 1984) 754–756, 827.

33. John Calvin, *Selected Works*, edited and translated by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Baker, 1983) V.330. John Robbins correctly stated: “The Reformation began with a rejection of contradiction and logical paradox, not an embrace of it. Those who today claim to be Reformed, and yet praise paradox, have abandoned this principle of the Reformation.” See John W. Robbins, “Forgotten Principles of the Reformation,” *The Trinity Review*, ed. John W. Robbins (October 2004) 3.

to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness . . . without finding fault, whatever is taught in sacred Scripture” (*Institutes* I.18.4). “In short, we ought to believe that the doctrine of Scripture is so full and complete in every respect, that whatever is defective in our faith ought justly to be attributed to ignorance of the Scriptures” (*Commentary* on John 20:9).

This also relates to the events of history and their meaning. Not only does the Bible teach us that certain events occurred in history, but it also tells us what those events mean. The interpretation is not subjective. God reveals the meaning to the reader in His Word (*Institutes* I.6–10; *Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16–17). “How different is this modern view [Neo-orthodoxy] and that . . . of Calvin,” said E. J. Young. “Calvin would have reacted with all his being against this false idea that the Bible and the Word of God are not to be identified.”³⁴ Moreover, asserted John Murray, “we find in Calvin himself no sense of incongruity between Scripture as being itself the truth of God and Christ as truth incarnate, nor even between an inerrant Scripture and Christ as the focal point of revelation.”³⁵ Neo-orthodoxy cannot rationally claim the Geneva Reformer as one of their own.³⁶

Scripture, taught John Calvin, was written through God’s prophets and apostles, who were moved along by the Holy Spirit, so that they wrote without error. These men were the “certain and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit and therefore their writings are to be received as the oracles of God.” We are to “regard

them [the Scriptures] as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.” We “have received it [the Bible] from God’s own mouth by the ministry of men. . . . [In the Bible] we hold the unassailable truth” (*Institutes* IV.8.9; I.7.1, 5). “Peter especially bids us to believe the prophecies as the indubitable oracles of God, because they have not emanated from men’s own private suggestions” (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 1:20).

Some critics have assumed that Calvin did not hold to such a high and lofty view of the inspiration of Scripture because he never wrote a major formal treatise on the subject. But as John Gerstner pointed out, “that is not at all surprising inasmuch as the doctrine was not an issue of his day. His debate with Rome was not over the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture. Both sides tacitly assumed the position.” Nevertheless, “when Calvin does speak explicitly on Scripture, his view is asserted unambiguously.” For example, he says that Scripture is God’s “sure and infallible record,” “the inerring standard,” “the pure Word of God,” “the infallible rule of His holy truth,” “free from every stain or defect,” “the inerring certainty,” “the certain and unerring rule,” “unerring light,” God’s “infallible oracles.”³⁷ A higher view of Scripture as the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God could hardly be expressed. As stated by Kantzer, it cannot be seriously questioned that Calvin held to the “rigidly orthodox verbal type of inspiration.”³⁸

Because of this, taught Calvin, Scripture is to be given the same reverence which one owes to God Himself, “since it has proceeded from Him alone, and there is nothing human mixed with it” (*Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible owes its origin to the Triune God. It is His “eternal and inviolable truth”; God speaks in His Word (*Institutes* I.6.1–3; I.7.1). In the words of Wileman, “the Word of God was as sacred to him [Calvin] as if he heard it spoken by the lips of the Author.”³⁹ Indeed, averred Calvin, “God is its Author” (I.7.4).

As noted in his *Commentary* on Matthew 27:9, Calvin did not deny that during transmission, due to scribal error, a few textual corruptions had crept into the copies (*apographa*) and translations of the original writings (*autographa*). His view was that of the *Westminster Confession* (1.8), that only the autographs were “immediately inspired by God.” But he also would agree with the *Confession* that God, “by His singular care and providence [had so] kept [His Word] pure in all ages,” that the copies we have are to be considered “authentic” (*Commentary* on Psalm 119:89).⁴⁰

Calvin’s view of inspiration maintained that the authors of Scripture were acted upon by the Holy Spirit in an “organic” way,⁴¹ in accordance with their own

34. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Eerdmans, 1957) 232.

35. John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Evangelical Press, 1979) 37.

36. Wilhelm Niesel has asserted that John Calvin was basically Neo-orthodox in his view of Scripture; *The Theology of John Calvin*, 27–39. As we have seen, such an assertion is unfounded.

37. Cited in Gerstner, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” 391.

38. Kenneth S. Kantzer, as cited in Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty*, 11.

39. William Wileman, *John Calvin: His Life, His Teaching, and His Influence* (Gospel Mission, 1981) 124.

40. Calvin’s confidence that God had preserved His Word through the centuries of time is also evident in his defense of the Johannine comma: 1 John 5:7–8, as part of the original writings (*Commentary* on 1 John 5:7–8). The Reformer’s adherence to these verses as being a part of the autographic writings also makes it clear that he was an advocate of the Majority Text or Textus Receptus view of textual criticism, and that he would have strongly opposed the Critical Text theory of Westcott and Hort. See W. Gary Crampton, “Original Manuscripts, the Majority Text, and Translations,” *The Trinity Review* (July and August, 2004).

41. Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans, 1933; 1987) 42–43.

personalities, characters, temperaments, gifts, and talents. Each author wrote in his own style, and all the while it was the Holy Spirit moving him along to write infallible truth. In fact, each author's style was itself produced by the providence of God (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 1:20–21 and John 3:12).

It is true that the Reformer used the word “dictated” when referring to the inspiration of Scripture. In his *Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16, for example, he taught that “the Law and the Prophets are ... dictated by the Holy Spirit.” But, as Warfield concluded, when Calvin used the word “dictate” he was speaking with regard to the result, not the mode of inspiration; that is, “the production of a pure Word of God free from all human admixtures” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 63–64). E. J. Young agreed with this conclusion:

At the same time, although the term *dictation* in itself is not objectionable and expresses forcefully the divine origin of the words of the Bible, it is perhaps unwise to use the word today without some qualification. A new connotation has come upon the term which it obviously did not have in the day of Calvin. When we speak of dictation, there immediately comes to mind the thought of the businessman dictating to his stenographer, or the teacher dictating an exercise to her pupils. In both these instances it does not make too great a difference who takes down the dictation. One stenographer can probably do it as well as another, and if one is not available, another can easily be obtained. Likewise, when the teacher dictates a passage to her class, the important thing is that the pupils take down precisely what has been dictated, and do not add to it or subtract from it. The person of the stenographer or of the pupil is in reality a comparatively negligible factor. Such, however, is not the situation with respect to the human writers of the Bible. True enough, the words which they employed were taught them by the Holy Spirit, but it is not the case that it makes no difference who wrote those words. It is not true that Peter might just as well have written the Pauline epistles as the great Apostle himself. It would serve the interests of clarity, therefore, if, in the discussion of this doctrine, we lay stress upon the fact that although the Bible teaches that its very words are from God, it most emphatically does not teach a mechanical dictation view of inspiration.

Men like [Francis] Turretin, Calvin, and others who have written on this subject have been eager to do justice to the human side of the Bible as have some of the modern rejecters of the Biblical doctrine. It is a sad thing

that scholarly men of our day constantly erect a straw man and seek to attack it instead of coming to grips with the Scriptural teaching itself. Those who believe the Bible and who wish to do justice to its teaching are as concerned as anyone to refute the notion that inspiration was a mechanical kind of dictation, that the human writers were mere automata whose personalities were entirely suspended in the writing of the books of the Bible (Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, 66–67).

To Calvin, it was not merely the doctrine and/or the content of Biblical revelation that is inspired; it is Scripture itself. Every word is God-breathed (*Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and 2 Peter 1:20). This is the doctrine of plenary, verbal revelation. Wrote Gregg Singer:

There can be no doubt that Calvin regarded the men who wrote the Bible as organs of the Holy Spirit, who guided them to write in such a way that they were without error of any kind.... In his *Institutes*, his commentaries, and his many writings, there is an abundance of evidence ... [which points to] one inescapable fact: Calvin believed that the Bible is the uniquely inspired Word of God and that, as such, it differs from all other literature (Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits*, 8–9).

The Authority of Scripture

According to Calvin, the authority vested in Scripture is derived from its unique origin. It is the Word of God. We are to give to Scripture the same allegiance as if the words were spoken by God Himself: “Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there [in Scripture] the living words of God were heard” (*Institutes* I.7.1). “For God is not to be separated from His Word” (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 1:9–10).

The 66 books of Holy Writ are not only the sole authority for the church of Jesus Christ, but they are the sole authority for every institution. “It is the will of the Lord that we shall depend wholly on His Word, and that our knowledge shall be confined within its limits.... Everything that relates to the guidance of our life is contained in them [the Scriptures] abundantly” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 8:20; 30:1). Not even the decisions of church councils are to have precedence over the Word of God (IV.8.1, 8, 10; IV.9.1–14). The view of the Reformer is well stated in the *Westminster Confession* (31.3–4): The “decrees and determinations” of church councils are to be followed only “if consonant to the

Word of God.” “All synods and councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to made the rule of faith or practice; but to be used as a help in both.”

Gregg Singer maintained that it was John Calvin’s high view of Biblical revelation by which he could “with full assurance assert that the Scriptures are the final authority in all areas of human life” (Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits*, 10). Ronald Wallace was of the same opinion: Calvin “was convinced that the challenge and power of the Gospel must be allowed to cleanse, regenerate and direct not only the human heart but every aspect of social life on earth—family affairs, education, economics, and politics. Christ sought not only an altar in the human heart for His priestly ministry, but a throne at the center of all human life for His kingly ministry” (Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 28). Here the Reformer is in accord with the teaching of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q. 3): “The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, the *only* rule of faith and obedience.” Calvin held to “the Puritan principle,” said Warfield, “of absolute dependence on the Word of God as the source of knowledge of His will, and exclusive limitation to its prescriptions of doctrine, life, and even form of church government and worship” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 39n). There was only *one* rule, *one* standard, *one* final authority over every area of life for John Calvin, and that is the Word of God.

Of course, as taught by Calvin and the Westminster theologians, it is the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit which corroborates this authority. As stated in the *Westminster Confession* (1.5): “Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” “It is the part of the Holy Spirit,” commented Calvin, “to confirm within us what God promises in His Word” (*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 1:21). And again:

I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is fit to witness of Himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.... For even if it [Scripture] wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit” (*Institutes* I.7.4–5).

Non-believers may have a certain understanding of Scripture, but because they are not “inwardly taught”

by the Spirit, they never have a genuine spiritual grasp of it (*Commentary* on James 2:19 and 1 Corinthians 2:14). “All that have not the Holy Spirit as a witness, so as to return their Amen to God, when calling them to an assured hope of salvation, do on false grounds assume the name of Christians” (*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 1:21).

As the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is necessary to confirm the authority of God’s Word and to cause one spiritually to acquiesce to it, Calvin also recognized our need for the Spirit to further illuminate the Word of God for us. In this process, the Spirit does not reveal new information which causes the reader to believe and/or further understand the Scriptures. Rather, the Spirit progressively gives to the Christian a greater and greater understanding of the Scriptures. He sheds more light on Biblical texts so that the believer can better grasp the fullness of the message set forth in the Bible. The Christian’s mind is transformed to think and act Biblically (*Commentary* on John 17:17). It is by “living doctrine,” said the Genevan, that God “works effectually on the minds of men, through the grace of the Spirit” (*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 3:6). “For Christ is never dormant where He reigns, but the Spirit renders effectual His power.” And the Spirit does this by increasing our “knowledge of Christ; for it transforms us into His image” (*Commentary* on 1 John 3:6). The Scriptures are only “read profitably, when we renounce the mind and feelings of the flesh, and submit to the teaching of the Spirit” (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 1:20).

John Murray aptly summed up Calvin’s view of Biblical authority:

The sum of this is clear. God speaks in Scripture. In it He opens His sacred mouth. In Scripture the majesty of God confronts us. The divinity inheres in the Scripture and it therefore exhibits the plainest evidence that it is God’s Word. When we bring sound minds it compels our submission and obedience. And our conclusion must be that this is but another way of saying that Scripture is by its nature divinely authoritative (Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty*, 50).

The Word Preached

The Second Helvetic Confession asserts that “the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God” (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, III.237–238). Calvin agreed. For him the preaching of the Word of God is, when properly spoken, to be considered as nothing less than the

Word coming out of the mouth of God, because He “employs [such] men as His ministers” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 55:11). In this sense, “the Word of God is not distinguished from the word of the prophet” (*Commentary* on Haggai 1:12). The authority which Christ has given to Gospel ministers in His church, as “porters ... of the kingdom of heaven, because they carry its keys,” along with the “power of binding and loosing,” has to do with the power resident in the proclamation of the Word of God and its effect on the auditors (*Commentary* on Matthew 16:19).⁴²

Calvin believed that which is taught in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 89), that “the Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.” “Peter declares that what is preached,” commented Calvin, “is the life-giving Word ... the voice which is in itself mortal, is made an instrument to communicate eternal life” (*Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:25). It is, of course, the Spirit united with the Word that empowers the preaching. “All power of action ... resides in the Spirit Himself, and thus all praise ought to be referred to God alone.” The Word preached, “without the efficacy of His Spirit ... would be fruitless” (*Commentary* on Ezekiel 2:2).

Calvin held to a presbyterian form of church government, wherein there are four basic orders of offices: pastors, doctors (teachers), elders, and deacons. The pastors and teachers have as their primary responsibility that of preaching and teaching the Word of God (*Institutes* IV.3–4).⁴³ God “instituted ‘pastors and teachers’ (Eph. 4:11) through whose lips He might teach His own.” The ministry of the Word is “the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body” (IV.1.1; IV.3.2).

Preachers and teachers of the Word must be faithful to their calling. They must be diligent in their service to God. “Saint Paul shows us also that when we have good and faithful teachers and others that labor to show us the way of salvation, it is a sign that our Lord Jesus Christ has not left us, nor forgotten us, but that He is present with us, and watches for our salvation” (*Sermon* on Ephesians 4:11–12). There is a vast difference “between the true servants of God, who discharge their duty in earnest, and talkative men, who are satisfied with their own powers of eloquence or rather garrulity.” Those pastors “who truly consecrate themselves to God, not only learn what they speak of,” i.e., they must be diligent students of the Word of God, “but as food is eaten, so also they receive within them the Word of God, and hide it in the inmost recesses of their heart, so that they may

bring it forth from thence as food properly dressed” (*Commentary* on Ezekiel 2:8).

As alluded to above, Calvin taught that those who minister the Word of God should be God-ordained men (not women). The office of the bishop is “forbidden” to women. It is restricted to men who have a “profound learning” of the Scriptures, and who also possess the “talent for teaching.” Those men who have been ordained to preach Christ’s Word “ought to be qualified for teaching” (*Commentary* on 1 Timothy 3:1–2). Paul “assigns to teachers the duty of dividing or cutting” the Scriptures, “as if a father, in giving food to his children, were dividing the bread, by cutting it into small pieces” (*Commentary* on 2 Timothy 2:15).

When the Word is preached, said Calvin, it has a two-fold effect: It either softens or hardens the heart of the hearer (*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:14–17). It always accomplishes its purpose. “As the Word is efficacious for the salvation of believers, so it is abundantly efficacious for the condemning of the wicked” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 55:11).

According to the Reformer, when the Word of God is properly preached, it is a sign of the presence of God and the instrument of Christ’s rule. The Spirit continues to speak through His Word in this God-ordained function. The Lord approaches His people through the preaching of Scripture (*Commentary* on Isaiah 50:2). “God has ordained His Word as the instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all His graces, is dispensed to us.”⁴⁴

Further, said the Genevan, the Gospel is the sceptre for Christ’s kingdom. “He reigns by His Spirit, and by means of His Word. And by that means as it were all things are filled with Him, and by the Gospel” (*Sermon* on Ephesians 4:7–10). Then too, Gospel preaching is also the means by which Christ intends the reconciliation of the whole world, i.e., the reconciliation of all things in Christ (*Commentary* on Isaiah 51:16). The world will be “brought under Christ’s authority” by means of Gospel preaching (*Commentary* on 2 Thessalonians 2:3). And even though the Antichrist (the Roman papacy) will not be “wholly and in every respect destroyed ... [until] that final day [the second advent] of the restoration

42. In Calvin’s teaching, “the power of binding and loosing” primarily has to do with church discipline. The church “binds him whom it excommunicates,” whereas it “looses” the repentant sinner whom it receives back “into communion” with the church, “for it makes him a sharer of the unity which it has in Christ” (*Institutes* IV.11.2).

43. The pastors also administered the sacraments (*Institutes* IV.3.1–4).

44. From the *Opera Selecta*, cited in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 85.

of all things,” in the meantime, Christ will “put to flight the darkness in which Antichrist will reign” by means of the preaching of His Word. The proclamation of “true and sound doctrine ... is spoken of as Christ’s coming to us” (*Commentary* on 2 Thessalonians 2:8).

It is obvious that Calvin had a very optimistic view of the advancement of Christ’s kingdom on earth, prior to the second advent.⁴⁵ “We have no reason to doubt, that whenever He [Christ] raises up faithful teachers, He will crown their labor with prosperous success” (*Commentary* on Luke 10:18). Christ “subdues the world to Himself by the preaching of the Gospel” (*Commentary* on Acts 1:8). Through the proclamation of the Scriptures, God’s kingdom “is continually growing and advancing to the end of the world” (*Commentary* on Matthew 6:10). We are to expect a time to come “when Christ shall have brought the Gentiles and the nations under His dominion.” There will come a time when the boundaries of the church “shall be extended as far and wide as there shall be space throughout the whole world” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 2:4 and 60:4). Wallace said it well:

To Calvin, the preached Word of God was the sceptre by which Christ continually established His unique and spiritual rule over the minds and hearts of His people. If such a Word was to be heard with its full authority and power the pastors must be left entirely free to preach it in its fullness without interference. He believed that such unfettered preaching of the Word would change Geneva and indeed the whole world (Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 63).

This is not to say, however, that Calvin believed that there will ever be a converted earth prior to the final day. On the contrary, the “more God offers Himself by the Gospel to the world, and the more He invites men to His kingdom, the more audacious on the other hand

will ungodly men vomit forth the poison of their impiety” (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 3:3).

The Interpretation of Scripture

It should come as no surprise that Calvin considered sound exegesis, i.e., faithful Biblical interpretation, as imperative. He used “the best tools and methods of scholarship available at his time.”⁴⁶ “Calvin,” wrote John Murray, “was the exegete of the Reformation and in the first rank of Biblical exegetes of all time.”⁴⁷ Gregg Singer called him “the prince of exegetes” (*John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits*, vi).

According to Donald McKim, among the early church theologians, “Calvin relied most heavily on Augustine for theological interpretations and on John Chrysostom for matters of Biblical interpretation” (McKim, “Calvin’s View of Scripture,” 65). The former was far more influential on the Genevan (he quotes Augustine over 400 times in the *Institutes* alone). Calvin believed that the African Bishop was the most Biblical of all the church theologians.⁴⁸ As is evident from his *Commentary* on Romans 12:6, along with Augustine, he held to the basic hermeneutical principle of “the analogy of faith,” which is well explained by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.9): “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

At the same time, Calvin took issue with Augustine in opposing any form of allegorical interpretation. He avoided speculative theology altogether. In his *Commentary* on Romans 9:14 he stated: “When the Lord closes His holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may not go further.” And in the preface of the Geneva Bible He wrote:

The Bible was not given to us to satisfy our foolish curiosity and pride. Yet Paul says it is useful. For what? To instruct us in sound doctrine, to comfort us, to inspire us, and to make us able to perform every good work. If anyone asks us what constructive power we expect to receive from it, the answer can be given in one sentence, that through it we learn to place our trust in God and to walk in fear of Him.⁴⁹

In all of his exegesis Calvin had a genuine desire to edify the church of Jesus Christ. In his Dedicatory to the exposition of the minor prophets he wrote:

45. My thanks to Dr. F. Nigel Lee for his insights on Calvin’s view of eschatology.

46. Donald K. McKim, “Calvin’s View of Scripture,” *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, 64–65.

47. John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) I:308.

48. Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits*, 7. Interestingly, according to Curt Daniel, the Italian Peter Martyr Vermigli (1560–1562) was the contemporary with whom Calvin was closest when it came to theology. Vermigli is quoted in the *Institutes* more than any other contemporary, and more than anyone else besides Augustine. See Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Good Books, 2003) 21.

49. Cited in McKim, “Calvin’s View of Scripture,” 66.

If God has indued me with any aptness for the interpretation of Scripture, I am fully persuaded that I have faithfully and carefully endeavored to exclude from it all barren refinements, however plausible and fitted to please the ear, and to preserve genuine simplicity, adapted solidly to edify the children of God, who, being not content with the shell, wish to penetrate to the kernel.⁵⁰

As noted above, Calvin taught that God has given us ministers of the Word to help us in understanding the Scriptures. “Frantic men require inspiration and revelations from heaven ... [and] they condemn the minister of God, by whose hand it ought to be governed. ... But God will not have us despise those helps which He offers unto us.... And here we must remember, that the Scripture is not only given us, but that interpreters and teachers are also added, to be helps to us” (*Commentary* on Acts 8:31).

John Calvin himself was an arduous laborer in the ministry of the Word. In addition to his preaching each Lord’s Day, he preached each Thursday in the university, and gave a public exposition every Friday. This was in addition to his writing ministry, which was extensive (Wileman, *John Calvin: His Life, His Teaching, and His Influence*, 83). In his address “to the reader” of the *Institutes*, he wrote: “Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor [writing the *Institutes*] to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling” (*Institutes*, “John Calvin to the Reader”). The man seemed to possess an indefatigable industry.

Calvin averred that “the best method of seeking God is to begin at His Word” (*Commentary* on Genesis 48:15). It is here, in a serious study of the Bible, that one comes to know Christ more intimately. Calvin agreed with the teaching of the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 24), that Jesus Christ, as the Word of God, is the author of all Scripture: “Christ executes the office of a Prophet, in revealing to us, by His Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.” Jesus Christ “is Himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father,” said Calvin, and “all divinely revelations” come through Him; He is the “wellspring of all oracles.” Christ “alone is the schoolmaster of the church” (*Institutes* I.13.7; IV.8.1). Further:

First, if what Christ says is true—“No one sees the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son

chooses to reveal Him (Matt. 11:27)—surely they who would attain the knowledge of God should always be directed by that eternal Wisdom [Christ]. For how could they either have comprehended God’s mysteries with the mind, or have uttered them, except by the teaching of Him to whom alone the secrets of the Father are revealed? Therefore, holy men of old knew God only by beholding Him in His Son as in a mirror (2 Cor. 3:18). When I say this, I mean that God has never manifested Himself to men in any other way than through the Son, that is, His sole wisdom, light, and truth. From this fountain Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others drank all that they had of heavenly teaching. From that same fountain, all the prophets have also drawn every heavenly oracle that they have given forth (*Institutes* IV.8.5).

But Christ is not only the author of all Scripture, He is also the subject of all Scripture. Calvin commented:

If we wish to obtain the knowledge of Christ, we must seek it from the Scriptures.... First, then, we ought to believe that Christ cannot be properly known in any other way than from the Scriptures; and if it be so, it follows that we ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them.... By the Scriptures, it is well known, is here meant the Old Testament; for it was not in the Gospel that Christ first began to be manifested, but, having received testimony from the Law and the Prophets, He was openly exhibited in the Gospel (*Commentary* on John 5:39).

And again:

God has never manifested Himself to men in any other way than through the Son, that is, His sole wisdom, light, and truth. From this fountain Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others drank all that they had of heavenly teaching. From the same fountain, all the prophets have also drawn every heavenly oracle that they have given forth (*Institutes* IV.8.5).

For the Geneva Reformer, “the whole Bible is primarily a book about Christ.”⁵¹ He considered “that the Old Testament and the New Testament form in the strictest sense one single testimony to Christ” (Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 110).

50. Cited in Murray, *Collected Writings*, I,309–310.

51. John T. McNeill, “John Calvin: Doctor Ecclesiae,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, 14.

Scripture as a Means of Grace

Calvin, along with the other Reformers and the later Puritans, considered the Scriptures, the sacraments, and prayer to be the “means of grace” which God has given to His church. As explained in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 88): “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, are His ordinances, especially the Word, the sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”

Calvin taught that the means of grace are administered by the church. In his view, “the elect are called by the preaching of the Gospel, sealed by baptism, and nurtured by the Lord’s supper, and thus brought into and kept in the society of Christ [i.e., the church]” (Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought*, 127). In the words of Calvin, “the church is the common mother of all the godly, which bears, nourishes, and brings up children to God, kings and peasants alike; and this is done by the ministry” (*Commentary* on Ephesians 4:12). Ordinarily, said the Reformer, there is no salvation outside of Christ’s church: “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother [the church] conceive us in her womb, give us birth, [and] nourish us at her breast.... Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation” (*Institutes* IV.1.4).

The means of grace, then, are those means by which the Spirit of God ministers to the saints, through the church, building them up in the faith. They are indispensable to the sanctification of the Christian. Of these

52. Ultimately, for Calvin, the reason that the call of God becomes effectual to some rather than to others has to do with God’s predestinating grace: “It is evident ... that all alike are not called; and observation proves the ignorance of those who will assert that the grace of God is extended to all in common, without any choice exerted on His part. Can any reason be imagined why God should not call all alike, except it be that His sovereign election distinguishes some from others?” (*Commentary* on Psalm 65:4).

53. In the *Institutes* (I.7–8) Calvin refers to saving faith in various ways: “true faith,” “the faith of the godly,” “firm faith,” “a solid assurance of eternal life,” “the certainty of the godly,” “the certainty which piety requires,” and “saving knowledge.”

54. When Calvin stated that faith is “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us,” he did not mean to indicate that “assurance of salvation” is necessary for salvation. For example, in his *Institutes* (III.2.17) he wrote: “Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.” Calvin would have agreed with the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (18.3), that “assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it.”

three means of grace, however, Calvin, along with the Reformers in general and the later Puritans, stressed the Word of God over the sacraments and prayer, because Scripture is a means of grace in itself. The sacraments and prayer, as essential as they are, are means of grace only with the Word. For one cannot understand the meaning of the sacraments apart from Biblical revelation, and one cannot know how to pray properly apart from the teaching of Scripture.

We have seen that Calvin believed that special revelation is necessary for man to come to a sound and saving knowledge of God, through Jesus Christ. He would have agreed with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (14.1):

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word: by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

Calvin believed that there is a universal or “general call, by which God invites all equally to Himself through the outward preaching of the Word—even those to whom He holds it out as a savor of death ... and as the occasion for severer condemnation.” But the “general call” only becomes effectual, “while by the inward illumination of His Spirit He causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts” (*Institutes* III.24.8). Even though the Word preached “turns into poison to the reprobate,” the first and “natural use of God’s Word is to bring salvation” (*Commentary* on Jeremiah 23:29). The effectual call of God is gracious and irresistible, and the person so called will be saved: “Grace is by no means offered by God only to be rejected or accepted as it may seem good to one; it is the same grace alone which inclines our heart to follow its movement, and produces in it the choice as much as the will” (*Institutes* II.13.13).⁵² God, by His powerful, Spirit directed Word, both created the heavens and the earth and continues to sustain, govern, and preserve the heavens and the earth. And it is that same powerful, Spirit directed Word which God uses effectually to call elect sinners and bring them into His kingdom (IV.20.20–22; *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 5:17–18).

Saving faith,⁵³ according to Calvin, rests upon the Word of God. “We hold faith to be a knowledge of God’s will toward us, perceived by His Word.” It is “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (*Institutes* III.2.6–7).⁵⁴ “There is no faith without God’s Word, for of His

faithfulness we cannot be convinced, until He has spoken.... True faith then is that which hears God speaking and rests on His promise” (*Commentary* on Hebrews 11:11). As taught in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 86), saving faith “in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the Gospel.” “Therefore,” wrote the Genevan, “take away the Word and no faith will then remain” (*Institutes* III.2.6).

To Calvin, then, saving faith and the Word of God are inextricably bound together. Such faith rests upon the Word, and it is applied by means of the Holy Spirit: “Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit” (*Institutes* I.8.13). “Let it suffice that Paul calls faith itself, which the Spirit gives us but which we do not have by nature, ‘the Spirit of faith’ (2 *Corinthians* 4:13).” When Jesus Christ “illumines us into faith,” He does so “by the power of His Spirit, [and] at the same time so engrafts us into His body that we become partakers of every good” (III.2.35).

The “every good” the Reformer speaks of includes justification and sanctification. Saving faith ushers in both, with God, in Christ, being the author of both:

We are on His [Christ’s] account acceptable to God, inasmuch as He expiated our sins by His death, and His obedience is imputed to us for righteousness. For as the righteousness of faith consists in remission of sins and a gracious acceptance, we obtain both through Christ.... From this also, we infer, that we cannot be justified freely through faith alone without at the same time living holily. For these fruits of grace are connected together, as it were by an indissoluble tie, so that he who attempts to sever them does in a manner tear Christ in pieces (*Commentary* on 1 *Corinthians* 1:30).

Calvin referred to the doctrine of justification by grace alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone (*sola fide*), as “the main hinge on which religion turns” (*Institutes* III.11.1). According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 33), “justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” This is Calvin’s view. “He is said to be justified in God’s sight who is both reckoned righteous in God’s judgment, and has been accepted on account of His righteousness... justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through

faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man” (III.11.2).

As seen, when Calvin spoke of justification “by faith alone,” what he meant was “by Christ alone.” The ground of justification is Christ’s vicarious righteousness and sacrifice. Faith is in no way to be considered as meritorious. Faith means trusting in Christ who alone justifies (*Institutes* III.11.23). “Our justification rests upon God’s mercy alone and Christ’s merit, and faith, when it lays hold of justification, is said to justify.... We say that faith justifies, not because it merits righteousness for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument whereby we obtain free the righteousness of Christ” (III.18.8).

Finally, the Bible teaches that justification is forensic; it is a legal act. In justification, righteousness is imputed, not infused, as in Roman Catholicism.⁵⁵ Calvin and the Westminster Assembly taught that it is an alien righteousness which justifies; it is the righteousness of Christ (*Commentary* on 2 *Corinthians* 5:21). In the words of the *Westminster Confession* (11.1):

Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous, not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 35), sanctification is “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” With justification the guilt of sin is instantaneously eradicated, but with sanctification it is the pollution of sin which is progressively removed. Sanctification, as Calvin and the Westminster theologians agree, is inseparably related to and flows from justification. “God justifies no one whom He does not sanctify at the same time.” Therefore, “the whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness, for we have been called to sanctification” (*Institutes* III.16.1; III.19.2).

As noted, Calvin stressed the Biblical teaching that Bible study, along with the sacraments, and prayer, are

55. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1989–1995.

essential for spiritual growth, i.e., sanctification. He commented:

As Satan is daily making new assaults upon us, it is necessary for us to have recourse to arms, and it is meditation upon the Divine Law which furnishes us with armor to resist. Whoever, therefore, would desire to persevere in uprightness and integrity of life, let them learn to exercise themselves daily in the study of the Word of God; for whenever a man despises or neglects instruction, he easily falls into carelessness and stupidity, and all fear of God vanishes from his mind (*Commentary on Psalm 18:22*).

The Word of God functions as “spiritual food” for the soul, which must not be neglected. Christians see “the face of Christ” in the Word of God, and are progressively renewed into His image (*Institutes* IV.1.5). The process of renewal involves self-denial: a total resignation of the whole man to the sovereign will of God (III.7.1–10). The entirety of the Christian’s life entails “mortification”—a dying to self and sin—and “vivification”—a holy seeking after God (III.3.3). Progressively, “both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed” to the teaching of Scripture (I.13.3). Moreover, sanctification manifests itself in “good works,” i.e., works that are done in obedience to God’s Word, out of love for God and gratitude for His mercy toward us, with the purpose of glorifying Him (III.16.1–3). The doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone does not eliminate the need of good works. In fact, it necessitates it (*Commentary on Ezekiel 18:14–17*). Yet these good works are not the cause of our justification, but the result of it (*Commentary on James 2:21*). Calvin’s doctrine of good works was that of the later *Westminster Confession* (16.1–3):

Good works are only such as God has commanded in His holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.

These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the Gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto; that,

having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled to thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do of His good pleasure: yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

In the process of sanctification, said Calvin, God comes to meet with His saints in His Word; it is through the Word that the blessings of God’s promises flow to the elect (*Commentary on Psalms 18:31; 81:14; and 119:65*). The Christian man loves the Word of God. “Believers embrace and grasp the Word of God in every respect” (*Institutes* III.2.29). It is an “unfeigned love of God’s law [which] is certain evidence of adoption, since such a love is the work of the Holy Spirit.” One who despises the Word reveals a hardened heart; to despise the Word is tantamount to despising God Himself (*Commentary on Psalms 119:159 and 95:8*). There is “nothing more precious to Him [God] than His own truth” (*Institutes* III.2.8). Therefore, “no crime is more offensive to God than contempt of His Word” (*Commentary on Matthew 10:14*). “God cannot approve of anything that is not supported by His Word” (*Commentary on Isaiah 17:8*). On the other hand, when the law of God is written in the heart by the Spirit, that law will rule the individual. His life will be conformed to God’s Word through the process of sanctification (*Commentary on Jeremiah 31:33*).

The Sacraments as Means of Grace

We have already noted that Calvin and the Westminster theologians taught that although the Word of God is to be considered as the primary “means of grace,” the sacraments are also considered to be a “means of grace.” In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church-State, which maintains that there are seven sacraments in the New Testament age (Cf. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, II.119), in his *Institutes* (IV.19.1–37)⁵⁶ Calvin made it very clear that he believed that which is taught in the *Westminster Confession* (27.4), “that there be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord.” In the Geneva Confession (1536) he wrote:

56. In this section of the *Institutes* (IV.19.1–37), Calvin refutes the “five other [Roman Catholic] ceremonies, falsely termed sacraments.”

We believe that the sacraments which our Lord has ordained in His church are to be regarded as exercises of faith for us, both for fortifying and confirming it in the promises of God and for witnesses before men. Of them, there are only two which are instituted by the authority of our Savior: Baptism and the Supper of our Lord; for what is held within the realm of the pope concerning seven sacraments, we condemn as fable and lie.⁵⁷

“It seems to me,” said Calvin, “that a simple and proper definition [of a sacrament] would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of His good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward Him in the presence of the Lord and of His angels and before men.” A sacrament, he taught (following Augustine), is to be seen as “a visible form [sign] of an invisible grace” (*Institutes* IV.14.1). This accords with the teaching of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 92), that the sacraments “are sensible [i.e., may be impressed upon the sensory organs] signs [by which] Christ, and the benefits of the New Covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.” As covenant signs the sacraments signify inward spiritual graces. And as seals they attest to the genuineness or validity of the covenant promises of God (IV.14.3–6). But as with the other means of grace:

Christ is the ... substance of all the sacraments; for in Him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from Him.... Therefore, the sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess Him more fully and enjoy our His riches (IV.14.16).

The sacraments, taught Calvin, as external signs and seals, do not convey grace *ex opere* (“by the work performed”), as in Roman Catholicism (Cf. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, II.120–121); neither are they absolutely necessary for salvation (*Institutes* IV.14.14). Rather, he believed, in agreement with the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 91), that “the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that does administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith [in the promises of Scripture] receive them.”

Thus, Calvin commented that “the sacraments are

never separated from the Word.” This being so, “we may infer, that in the sacraments the [spiritual] reality is given to us along with the sign; for when the Lord holds out a sacrament, He does not feed our eyes with an empty and unmeaning figure, but joins the truth [of Scripture] with it, so as to testify that by means of them He acts upon us efficaciously.” Therefore, “we ought to believe that the truth must never be separated from the signs, though it ought to be distinguished from them” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 6:7). “A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself.” The sacrament is “a visible word” because “it represents God’s promises as painted in a picture and sets them before our sight, portrayed graphically and in the manner of images” (*Institutes* IV.14.3, 6). The sacraments are “seals of the Word.” And the Word is “the promise which explains the value and use of the signs” (*Commentary* on Ephesians 5:26).

It should also be noted that Calvin believed that the sacraments were graciously given by God to His church as a teaching device. As noted, the Word of God is a means of grace by itself, whereas the sacraments are means of grace only with the Word. But the sacraments (with the Word) do teach and strengthen the saints of God. As visible (and sensible) means of grace the sacraments aid us in our human weakness. Wrote Calvin:

For God’s truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive better confirmation from any other source than from itself. But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to His infinite kindness, so tempers Himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, He condescends to lead us to Himself even by these earthly elements [sacraments], and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings (*Institutes* IV.14.3).

Prayer is a Means of Grace

Prayer is also a means of grace. According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 98), “prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable

57. Cited in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, edited by J. K. S. Reid (Westminster, 1954) 29–30.

to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies.” Calvin concurred. He himself was very much a man of prayer. The Reformer practiced and recommended regular times of prayer: (at least) when rising in the morning, when retiring at night, and at meals (*Institutes* III.20.50).

Calvin called prayer “the principal exercise which the children of God have.” It is the “true proof” of saving faith (*Sermon* on 1 Timothy 2:1–2).⁵⁸ In the mind of the Reformer, a non-praying Christian is a contradiction in terms: “He who pretends that he trusts in God, and yet is so listless and indifferent” when it comes to the exercise of prayer, “lies shamefully. By prayer, then, true faith is known, as the goodness of a tree is known by its fruit” (*Commentary* on Psalm 22:4).

In His Word, God speaks to His people; in prayer, they speak to Him (*Institutes* III.20.1–2). Therefore, we must be diligent to study the Scriptures if we are to pray in a manner that pleases God (III.20.27). In our prayers, we are “not to ask any more than God allows ... faith grounded upon the Word is the mother of right prayer” (III.20.5). “For it is to be held as an axiom, that our prayers are faulty, so far as they are not founded on the Word” (*Commentary* on Genesis 19:18).

The *Psalms* are especially helpful and instructive in guiding our prayers. “It is by perusing these inspired compositions [the *Psalms*], that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book.”⁵⁹

Calvin would have agreed with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (21.3, 6), that “prayer ... is required by God of all men.... [and] God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself.” But he would also have us know that “our prayers are acceptable to God only in so far as Christ sprinkles and sanctifies them with the perfume of His own sacrifice” (*Commentary* on Psalm 20:3). For “there is no way of obtaining favor from God but through the intercession of Christ” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 42:1).

It is also noted that Calvin’s teaching on Scripture, along with the other means of grace affected his theology of public and corporate worship. He held to the

“regulative principle of worship,” which maintains that God is only to be worshipped in a manner which He has ordained in His Word.

This principle is concisely set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (21.1) as follows:

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

God, wrote the Reformer, “makes us conform to His lawful worship, that is, a spiritual worship established by Himself” (*Institutes* II.8.17). “Modes of worship regulated according to our own fancy, and honors rashly contrived by men, have no other advantage than this, that they rob God of His true honor, and pour upon Him nothing but reproach” (*Commentary* on John 6:15). We must reject “any mode of worship, that is not sanctioned by the command of God” (Calvin, *Selected Works*, I.133). The Reformer believed that in Acts 2:42 we are taught that “no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving” (*Institutes* IV.17.44).

The Law of God

John Calvin, along with the Westminster Assembly after him, did not separate the law and the Gospel, though he carefully distinguished one from the other. Law without Gospel kills, but there is no Gospel without the law to reveal one’s sinfulness and need for the grace of God in Christ (*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 3:4–18). “For what is proposed to us in Christ, unless what God had promised in the law? and therefore Christ is called the end of the law, and elsewhere its spirit: for if the law be separated from Christ, it is like a dead letter: Christ alone gives it life” (*Commentary* on Ezekiel 16:61).

In his *Institutes* (and other writings), Calvin distinguished categories of the law: moral (II.8.1–59), civil (II.7.10–11; IV.20.14–15), and ceremonial (II.7.1–2, 16–17). His overall teaching confirms that the moral law, i.e., the Ten Commandments and the general equity of the civil law, is continually binding on all mankind. “We must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law: for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and must, therefore be as unchangeable, as the justice of God, which it embraced, is constant and uniform” (*Commentary* on Matthew 5:17).

58. John Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy and Titus* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1983).

59. Calvin, “The Author’s Preface,” *Commentary* on Psalms.

Here he would have been in basic agreement with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (19.4–5):

To them [the people of Israel] also, as a body politic, He [God] gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.... The moral law does for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it: neither does Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.

For example, Calvin was convinced that the civil magistrate is obliged to enforce both tables of the Decalogue. Not to do so was to disobey the God of the law (*Institutes* IV.20.9). Further, throughout his *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, he showed that it is also incumbent on the magistrate to adopt the general equity of the Mosaic law as found in Scripture. And in the *Institutes* he said that magistrates “are wholly God’s representatives ... acting as His vicegerents” (IV.20.4). Therefore, “that ruler is deceiving himself who expects his kingdom lastingly to prosper when it is not ruled by God’s sceptre, that is, by His holy Word.”⁶⁰

According to the Genevan, the church and the state are separate institutions, with different functions, but they are both under the dictates of God’s law, and both are to work together for the advancement of God’s kingdom on Earth (*Institutes* IV.20.2, 8). As Greg Singer wrote: “Calvin believed that both the church and the state are divinely ordained and created, and that both are directly under Jesus Christ, who is both Lord of the church and King of kings.” The two institutions are assigned to two different spheres of operation, and both are still under God’s law (Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits*, 40–41). Whereas the church wields only the sword of the Spirit in dealing with sin, the state wields the sword of iron in accordance with Scripture, in dealing with crime. The state is to promote the welfare of the true church, as well as all his subjects, and to guard her against her opponents. But the magistrate is not to administer the Word of God or the sacraments. It has no authority over the keys of the kingdom. The church is to pray for and uphold the magistrate, to teach the magistrate his Biblical function, and to give rulers the honor due a Biblical institution. But the church is not to enter into the affairs of the civil government, other than for advice and counsel (*Institutes* IV.11.3; 20.1–3, 8; *Commentary* on Romans 13:1–7).

The duties of the state are mainly relegated to those of justice and defense. They include the prevention of open idolatry, swearing and cursing, illicit forms of dance, and Sabbath disobedience, as well as the promotion of proper marital relationships, sanctity of human life, and so forth. In so doing, the magistrate “carries out the very judgments of God” (*Institutes* IV.20.10). The civil magistrate is to work toward a holy commonwealth which God intended to establish on earth (IV.20.3). In fact, the Genevan went so far as to say that the office of civil magistrate “is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men” (IV.20.4). His view is that of the *Westminster Confession* (23.2):

It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto; in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.... The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he has authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed.

Frank Roberts wrote:

Building upon the doctrines of God and predestination, Calvin developed an activist form of Protestantism quite unlike that of Luther. Both Luther and Calvin believed that a sovereign God would certainly accomplish His purposes in the world. But Luther tended to limit his interest in this work of God to personal salvation, while Calvin believed God also intended to establish a holy commonwealth on Earth. In Geneva, Calvin attempted to found such a commonwealth which would honor God in every area of life.⁶¹

That Calvin was a strong advocate of Biblical civil law is related by Philip Schaff:

Calvin’s plea for the right and duty of the Christian magistrate to punish heresy by death stands or falls with his theocratic theory and the binding authority of the Mosaic code. His arguments are chiefly drawn from the

60. From the *Opera Selecta*, cited in Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 235.

61. Frank Roberts, *To All Generations* (Bible Way, 1981) 165.

Jewish law against idolatry and blasphemy, and from the examples of the pious kings of Israel (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, VIII.792).

Scripture also teaches that within the sphere of the civil magistrate is the right and duty to wage a lawful war, if necessary. “Princes must be armed,” said Calvin, “not only to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals by judicial punishment, but also to defend by war the dominions entrusted to their safekeeping, if at any time they are under enemy attack” (*Institutes* IV.20.11). Here he was in agreement with the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (23.2), that the magistrate “may lawfully now, under the New Testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.”

As for the ceremonial law, Calvin would have firmly supported the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* (19.3), that under the Old Testament economy, “God was pleased to give the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament.”

“The ‘ceremonies,’ said the Reformer, function ‘as shadows and figures corresponding to the truth’ of Jesus Christ and His cross work. These ‘ceremonies guided them [the Old Testament people of God] to Christ,’ who ‘is the end of the law unto salvation to every believer’ (*Institutes* II.7.1–2). With the coming of Christ, the ceremonial laws have been abrogated, ‘not in effect but only in use’:

Christ by His coming has terminated them [the ceremonies], but has not deprived them of anything of their sanctity; rather, He has approved and honored it. Just as the ceremonies would have provided the people of the Old Covenant with an empty show if the power of Christ’s death and resurrection had not been displayed therein; so, if they had not ceased, we would be unable today to discern for what purpose they were established (II.7.16).

Calvin also taught that the law of God has a three-fold purpose (Pedagogical, Political, Pattern):

Pedagogical: The law shows the righteousness of God and discloses the sinfulness of man, leading him to seek God’s forgiveness (*Institutes* II.7.6–9):

The first part is this: while it [the law] shows God’s righteousness, that is, the righteousness alone acceptable

to God, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness.... The law is like a mirror. In it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both—just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face. For when the capacity to follow righteousness fails him, man must be mired in sins. After the sin forthwith comes the curse. Accordingly, the greater the transgression of which the law holds us guilty, the greater the judgment to which it makes us answerable (II.7.6–7).

Political: The law restrains sin, sinners, and criminals, and is to be used to protect the community against unjust men. “The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats of the law.” Here the law serves as a “bridle” which restrains man “in some fear and reverence toward God” (*Institutes* II.7.10–11). But the law is also to be used as a guideline by which society is to be governed. Calvin recognized the various forms of civil government: absolute monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; and he opted for aristocracy—a form of republican government (IV.20.8). Further, the Genevan preached that the law of God is to be a guide in determining how crime is to be punished:

Then let us not think that this law is a special law for the Jews [only]; but let us understand that God intended to deliver us a general rule, to which we must yield ourselves ... it is lawful for all kings and magistrates, to punish heretics and such as have perverted the pure truth; but also that they be bound to do it (*Sermon on Deuteronomy 13:5*).

In a *Sermon on 1 Samuel 8:11–22*, Calvin taught the principle set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (23.1): “God, the supreme ruler and king of all the world, has ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good.” He preached:

Yet it is certain that all royal dominion is meant to be ministerial. Indeed, I must add that kings are to be servants and ministers of God. Therefore it behooves them to consider themselves His commissioned legates to the people, who are to administer His affairs faithfully and are to take care of the people. Even though the power of earthly princes be great in this world, still they must

realize that they are ministers and servants of God and the people.⁶²

Pattern: The law is a pattern for life (*Institutes* II.7.12–13). It admonishes the Christian man to seek and obey his God. “Here it is the function of the law, by warning men of their duty, to arouse them to zeal for holiness and innocence.” And “the law of God contains in itself that newness by which His image can be restored in us” (III.19.2; III.6.1). This third use of the law (*tertius usus legis*) is the “principal use” in Calvin’s theology. It not only reveals the character of God (II.8.51), it also sets forth His will (II.8.59). In the law God “lays down what He demands for us, and, in short, everything necessary to be known” (*Commentary* on Isaiah 8:20). It is “perfect pattern of righteousness . . . the everlasting and unchangeable rule to live by.” The law of God is “applicable to every age, even to the end of the world” (*Institutes* II.7.13). Further, “we must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law: for it is an eternal rule of a devout and holy life” (*Commentary* on Matthew 5:17). This is in accord with the statement of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (19.5) that “the moral law does for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof . . . neither does Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.” Hesselink correctly said that Calvin, “more than any other Reformer, stressed the continuing need of the law as a norm and guide in the Christian life.”⁶³

As is obvious from what we have seen, Calvin believed that even though the law of God functions as a pattern for the Christian’s life, at the same time the Christian has a certain freedom from the law. As stated by McKim, Calvin “sees Christian freedom as consisting of three parts: 1) freedom from the law—the Christian is justified by God’s mercy alone and not by his own works; 2) freedom of conscience—freed from the law’s yoke, one obeys God’s law willingly, as a response to grace, and not out of necessity; 3) freedom in ‘things indifferent’ (*adiaphora*).”⁶⁴

First, the Christian is no longer under the curse of the law: “Not that the law no longer enjoins believers to do what is right, but only it is not for them what it formerly was: it may no longer condemn and destroy their consciences by frightening and confounding them” (*Institutes* II.7.14). Second, “those bound by the yoke of the law are like servants assigned certain tasks each day by their masters unless they have fulfilled the exact measure of their tasks. . . . But sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their fathers, do

not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended. Such children ought we to be, firmly trusting that our services will be approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be” (III.19.5). And finally, “the third part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves ‘indifferent,’ we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently” (III.19.7). Calvin’s thought here is in accord with the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (20.1–2):

The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law [OT]. But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith and worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

62. Cited in W. Gary Crampton and Richard E. Bacon, *Built Upon the Rock* (Dallas, 2000) 47.

63. I. John Hesselink, “Christ, the Law, and the Christian,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, 179.

64. Donald K. McKim, “John Calvin: A Theologian for an Age of Limits,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, 295–296.

Conclusion

Louis Gaussen concluded his masterful treatise on the Word of God, *God-Breathed*, with the following words:

It follows from all we have said that there are in the Christian world but two schools, or two religions: that which puts the Bible above everything, and that which puts something above the Bible. The former was evidently that of Jesus Christ; the latter has been that of the rationalism of all denominations and of all times.

The motto of the former is this: The whole written Word is inspired by God, even to a single jot and tittle; the Scripture cannot be destroyed. . . . The motto of the second is this: There are human judges lawfully entitled to pass judgment on the Word of God.⁶⁵

John Calvin would have stood with His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He believed and taught that “the whole written Word is inspired by God, even to a single jot and tittle; [and that] the Scripture cannot be destroyed.” According to the Geneva Reformer, the Bible in all of its parts is from God, and there is nothing human added to it. The Bible is the ultimate authority of all areas of life. It stands in judgment over all, and it is to be judged by no one or no thing. In his *Commentary* on 2 Timothy 3:16, he wrote:

In order to uphold the authority of Scripture, he [Paul] declares that it is divinely inspired; for if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is the principle which distinguishes our religion [Christianity] from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the [authors of Scripture] did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.

If it be objected, “How can this be known?” I answer, both to disciples and to teachers, God is made known to be the author of it by the revelation of the same Spirit.

Moses and the prophets did not utter at random what we have received from their hand, but, speaking at the suggestion of God, they boldly and fearlessly testified, what was actually true, that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke. The same Spirit, therefore, who made Moses and the prophets certain of their calling, now also testifies to our hearts, that He has employed them as His servants to instruct us. Accordingly, we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone. This is the first clause, that we owe to God; because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.

Soli Deo Gloria. ■

65. Louis Gaussen, *God-Breathed: The Divine Inspiration of the Bible*, trans. David Scott, ed. John W. Robbins (The Trinity Foundation, 2001) 310.