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### *God, the word of god, and scripture: the mediation of the knowledge of god in Calvin's theology*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM  
GOD, THE WORD OF GOD, AND SCRIPTURE:  
THE MEDIATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY.

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF ARTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

THE DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY

BY  
PETER JONATHAN WILCOX

1991

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GOD, THE WORD OF GOD AND SCRIPTURE:  
THE MEDIATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY.  
by Peter Jonathan Wilcox.

- THESIS ABSTRACT -

This thesis attempts to elucidate Calvin's high view of the function of Scripture in the mediation of the knowledge of God. Two conclusions emerge:

- The first is that the statement 'Scripture is the Word of God' is not a premise with which Calvin's theological exposition begins, but a position to which the Reformer comes as a corollary of his understanding of the grace of God.
- The second is that Calvin's contention that the knowledge of God is mediated in Scripture rests upon his view that the nature of God is such that its most adequate form of self-expression is as Word.

There are three parts to the thesis.

- Part I is an examination of *The Actuality of the Knowledge of God in the Word of God*. This section is concerned with the actual content of the knowledge of God as it is mediated by the Word of God. The mediation of the knowledge of God in Scripture is set in the context of the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Eternal Word of God and the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Incarnate Word of God.
- Parts II and III explore *The Possibility of the Knowledge of God in the Word of God*. Part II asks how it is possible for the Word of God to be spoken, and answers the question in terms of Calvin's use of the principle of Accommodation. Part III considers how it is possible for the Word of God to be heard, and answers the question in terms of Calvin's consistent correlation of Word and Spirit. In both cases the mediation of the knowledge of God in Scripture is again set in the context of the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Eternal Word of God, and the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Incarnate Word of God.

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DECLARATION:

None of the material in this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university. The thesis is entirely my own work.

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For most of the period during which I completed the research for this thesis, I was curate of the Parish of All Saints' Church, Eaglescliffe, in the Diocese of Durham. The people of the parish led me in the knowledge of God, and this thesis is dedicated to them with affection.

- INTRODUCTION -

GOD, THE WORD OF GOD AND SCRIPTURE

- The Mediation of the Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology.

**The Purpose of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:**

In the Letter to the Reader with which he prefaces the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin sets out the purpose of his *magnum opus*.

It has been my purpose in this labour 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. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.'

There are two aspects of the Reformer's claim. First, he believes that in the *Institutes* he has 'embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and has arranged it in... order'; and secondly, he believes that if anyone rightly grasps the *Institutes* 'it will not be difficult for him to determine what we ought especially to seek in Scripture.' In a preface to the French Edition published in 1560, Calvin separates these two elements more clearly, in exhorting

all those who have reverence for the Lord's Word, to read [the *Institutes*], and to impress it diligently upon their memory, if they wish to have, first, a sum of Christian doctrine, and secondly, a way to benefit greatly from reading the Old as well as the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Given that Calvin takes Scripture to be the source of Christian doctrine, it may be said that he considers his *Institutes* to be both an adequate summary of Scripture and an introduction - or a key<sup>3</sup> - to Scripture.

This claim raises the following question: what is Calvin's construal of the Scriptures, given that he believes his *Institutes* is an adequate summary of and introduction to them? What reading of Scripture underlies the writing of the *Institutes*? The answer (which explains

everything and nothing) is that Calvin construes Scripture as the very 'word of God'.

To say that for Calvin 'Scripture is the Word of God' begs other, more basic, questions: what is his view of Scripture, such that he believes it to be the bearer of the Word of God; and more fundamentally still, what is his view of God, such that he believes God to have spoken his Word in the Scriptures? It is with these prior questions that this thesis is concerned.

Two preliminary observations are in order, by way of explanation of the structure of the thesis. The first seeks to account for the consistent progression, in the pages that follow, from the discussion of the Eternal Word of God, through the Incarnate Word of God to the Word of God contained in the Scriptures. The second seeks to account for the progression from the actuality of the knowledge of God in Part I, to the possibility of the knowledge of God in Parts II and III.

#### **The Problem of the Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology:**

A consistent progression is made in each of the three major parts of this thesis, from the Eternal Word of God, through the Incarnate Word of God to the Word of God contained in the Scriptures. This is an attempt to set in context the statements Calvin makes about the function of Scripture in the mediation of the knowledge of God.

Calvin himself raises the category of the knowledge of God in the opening words of the *Institutes*, and addresses the problem of the knowledge of God in its first five chapters. It may be said that for Calvin, theology begins with the problem of the knowledge of God.

Calvin himself does not use the phrase 'the *problem* of the knowledge of God'. Nevertheless the expression is an apt one: for Calvin does assert, first, that an intimate knowledge of God is a prerequisite for

authentic human life, and second, that such an intimate knowledge of God eludes humankind. The 'problem' of the knowledge of God as Calvin defines it is the inevitable absence of the knowledge of God in human experience, unless grace intervenes.

The 1559 edition of the *Institutes* opens with the carefully formulated statement that:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and substantial wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on these words, Wendel remarks that,

From the beginning of his work, Calvin places all his theology under the sign of what was one of the essential principles of the reform: the absolute transcendence of God, and his total otherness in relation to man. No theology is Christian and in conformity with the Scriptures but in the degree to which it respects the infinite distance separating God from his creature and gives up all confusion, all 'mixing', that might tend to efface the radical distinction between the Divine and the human. Above all, God and man must again be seen in their rightful places. That is the idea that dominates the whole of Calvin's theological exposition, and underlies the majority of his controversies.<sup>5</sup>

In fact this sounds rather more like the voice of Kierkegaard than Calvin, for Wendel fails to draw attention to an intimate nearness of God and humankind which is just as much a dominant idea in Calvin's theology as this 'radical distinction', and which is in fact a crucial part of his doctrine of the knowledge of God. Nevertheless it is true that the first point Calvin seeks to establish in his *Institutes* is that 'we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God'.<sup>6</sup> To this extent Wendel's assessment is correct: Calvin insists that there is a radical distinction between the Divine and the human, as a result of which humankind is utterly unable to secure the knowledge of God for itself.

However, the 'absolute transcendence of God' is just one half of the problem of the knowledge of God in Calvin's theology; the other half is what we might call the radical intimacy between God and humanity, which

Calvin affirms with equal vigour. It is not enough to say that, because of the infinite distance that separates God from his creation, it is beyond the capacity of humankind to know God for itself. For Calvin's observation that 'we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God' is made in the context of assertions about the particular relationship to God for which humanity is created. For Calvin, it is precisely to the knowledge of God that we are called.<sup>7</sup>

'All men are born and live to the end that they may know God'<sup>8</sup> and 'the final goal of the blessed life, moreover rests in the knowledge of God'<sup>9</sup>

The point at stake here is that the problem of the inability of humankind to 'mount up' to knowledge of God is made particularly acute in Calvin's theology: humankind is unable to secure for itself that very thing for which it was created. Calvin's aim in the opening chapters of the *Institutes* is to drive home not simply the enormity of the distance between God and his human creation and the complete inability of this creation to draw near to the Creator by itself, but also the fact that all this is so despite its being created precisely to enjoy this nearness to the Creator.

If we were created to know God, and cannot 'mount up' to know God by ourselves, there can be only one solution: that God, in his infinite mercy and grace, should 'descend' to make himself known. 'It remains for God himself to give witness of himself from heaven'.<sup>10</sup> In this fashion, by confining human knowledge of God exclusively to God's gift of himself, Calvin grounds his theology in the grace of God. The knowledge of God depends upon the gracious mediation of God. It is an emphasis upon this gracious mediation, and not simply Wendel's 'radical distinction between the Divine and the human', which 'dominates the whole of Calvin's theological exposition'.

It is significant that the statement that 'it remains for God to

himself to give witness of himself from heaven' (I. v. 13) is followed almost at once in the *Institutes* by an appeal to the necessity of Scripture (I. vi. 1). Calvin introduces the role of Scripture in the mediation of the knowledge of God in the context of the self-giving of God. It is important that this context is kept in mind, for instance when Calvin insists that

in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine, and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture. Hence there also emerges the beginning of true understanding, when we reverently embrace what it pleases God there to witness of himself.<sup>11</sup>

The mediating function attributed to the Scriptures here is predicated upon the grace and initiative of God. That is to say: the reference to Scripture is not a primary one, for the knowledge of God comes to us from the Godhead. Elsewhere Calvin summarises his thoughts on this subject as follows:

Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. For how can the human mind measure of the measureless essence of God according to its own little measure, a mind as yet unable to establish for certain the nature of the sun's body, though men's eyes daily gaze upon it? Indeed, how can the mind, by its own leading come to search out God's essence when it cannot even get to its own? Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of Himself. For, as Hilary says, he is the one fit witness to himself, and is not known except through himself. But we shall be "leaving it to him" if we conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us, without enquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the context that the 'Word of God' referred to in this passage is nothing else than Scripture. And yet once again Calvin reminds his readers that God 'is not known except through himself'. When Calvin speaks of the mediation of the knowledge of God in the Word of God, his primary reference is not to Scripture but to the Second Person of the Trinity. The repeated progression in the pages that follow from the Eternal Word of God, through the Incarnate Word of God to the Word of God contained in the Scriptures is an attempt to keep

Calvin's statements about Scripture in this wider context, and to draw out the implications of it.

### **The Priority of Actuality over Possibility in Calvin's Theology.**

There is a second progression in the structure of this thesis which may require some explanation: namely the progression from the actuality of the knowledge of God in Part I to the possibility of the knowledge of God in Parts II and III.

In fact this progression is also implied by Calvin's statement that 'it remains for God himself to give witness of himself from heaven'. Calvin asserts here, and throughout the *Institutes*, that our knowledge of God is a knowledge, not of what God is in himself, but of what he is to us.

In *Institutes* I.ii.1, Calvin makes what he clearly considers to be an important distinction between '*qualis sit Deus*' and '*quid sit Deus*'.

What is God? Men who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort he is, and what is consistent with his nature. What good is it to profess with Epicurus some sort of God who has cast aside the care of the world only to amuse himself in idleness? What help is it in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?<sup>13</sup>

Calvin makes the distinction at the outset of his theological exposition, in order to prepare his readers for what is to follow: the *Institutes* is not concerned with what God is like in himself, but with how God affects us. This particular example is a rather mild statement of a distinction Calvin can insist upon strongly. Elsewhere he expresses himself more vehemently.

The most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.<sup>14</sup>

He is extremely dismissive of those who, 'overlooking the works of God,

aspire with a foolish and insane curiosity to inquire into his *Essence*.<sup>15</sup> The intensity of Calvin's aversion to 'the investigation of the essence of God' comes across more clearly here. The Reformer consistently eschews the temptation to 'philosophize with subtlety concerning God's essence',<sup>16</sup> insisting instead that we know God 'not as he is in himself, but as he is toward us'.<sup>17</sup> We know God not in his essence, but only in his works - that is, only as he encounters us.

Such expressions are so characteristic of Calvin, and so close to the heart both of his theology itself - and, if we may differentiate for a moment, of his theological method - that it is difficult to do justice to their significance. Without doubt Calvin's distinction between the two questions '*quid sit Deus?*' and '*qualis sit Deus?*' is one of the clearest indications of the degree to which his theology represents a decisive break with the tradition which prevailed in the church of the late Middle Ages. For with the assertion that God is known only as he encounters us, Calvin subverted at a stroke the scholastic theology of his Roman contemporaries and immediate predecessors, which was heavily dependent upon a particular device known as the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being.

The notion that theology could, indeed should, proceed by way of *analogia entis* was almost the hallmark of scholastic theology. The application of the principle of the analogy of being rested upon the conviction that it is possible to abstract knowledge of God by analogy, and specifically by analogy with the nature of created reality and human existence. In other words, scholastic theology typically proceeded on the basis that creation bears the marks of its Creator, and that because this is so it is possible to abstract, by analogy from the creation, a knowledge of the Creator. The principle was applied in slightly different ways by different medieval theologians. But whether the

emphasis was on abstraction from human existence in particular, on the grounds that humankind is created peculiarly in the image of God, or from creation more broadly, the principle remained the same - knowledge of God may be derived from what is. The use of the *analogia entis* in scholastic theology amounts to an affirmation that knowledge of God is within the natural capacity of every human being, and is integral to human existence. But there is more to the notion of *analogia entis* than this positive 'natural theology' *per se*. For knowledge of God which is derived by analogy from the being of humankind is inevitably a knowledge, primarily, of the being of God. And this is indeed the character of scholastic theology: it tends to focus knowledge of God upon the attributes of God - upon God as he is in himself.

Calvin's declaration that our knowledge of God is a knowledge not of his essence but of his works, runs counter to the *analogia entis* at both these points.

Firstly, whereas the analogy of being suggests that the human capacity to know God is inherent, and independent of God, the emphasis on 'God as he is toward us' is Calvin's defence of the priority, initiative and objectivity of God in human knowledge of him and speech about him.<sup>12</sup> The affirmation that 'it remains for God himself to bear witness of himself from heaven' is a denial of the possibility of a 'natural theology'. While Calvin was happy enough to accept that knowledge of God must be analogical, in the sense that it proceeds by comparisons with what we know, he employed a radically different conception of the character of the analogy. In Calvin's theology it is not the nature of the human being which is the basis for analogical knowledge of God, but the activity of God himself. This analogy Calvin calls 'the analogy of faith'.<sup>13</sup> Knowledge of God is received by faith; faith is directed towards the gift of God in his revelation of himself.

The *analogia fidei* acknowledges the necessity of the initiative of God:

For what is more consonant with faith than to recognise that we are naked of all virtue, to be clothed by God? That we are empty of all good, to be filled by him? That we are slaves of sin, to be freed by him? Blind, to be illumined by him?<sup>20</sup>

All knowledge of God is God-given according to Calvin: it comes only at his initiative. There is truly no trace of an immediate knowledge of God in Calvin's theology. There are, of course, statements in the *Institutes* which sound as though they form the basis of a 'natural theology' in Calvin: he tells us that 'there is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity'<sup>21</sup>, and that 'as experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men'.<sup>22</sup> But these statements too turn out to refer to manifestations of God's gracious condescension to his creation. They are by no means a qualification of Calvin's argument: without exception, we know God only as by his grace he mediates knowledge of himself to us.

Secondly, whereas the analogy of being directed theological attention to the *being* and *attributes* of God, Calvin's emphasis on the *opera Dei* obviously directs it away from these towards the *activity* of God in his revelation of himself. Verbs rather than adjectives dominate Calvin's discussion of the knowledge of God.<sup>23</sup> If it is true that scholastic theology is characteristically static, and Calvin's dynamic, then it is so because of this fundamental difference of method. It is significant in this regard that there is no formal discussion in Calvin's *Institutes* of the attributes of God, as there is, for instance, in the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas. Instead, in the one section of the *Institutes* to include 'the attributes of God' in its title,<sup>24</sup> Calvin at once goes on to speak of what would usually be called attributes of God (kindness, goodness, justice, mercy) as his 'powers'. It is perhaps unfair to describe the concern of the scholastics with the being of God

as an attempt to invade the essence of God, but it is evident that Calvin perceived it that way. At any rate, it is clear that Calvin's denial that we may know God as he is in himself, and his contention that we know God only as he is toward us, leads directly to this emphasis upon the powers and works of God.

However, it should not be thought Calvin never speaks of the essence or nature of God. Indeed, he refers to the nature of God even within the distinction he makes in *Institutes* I.ii.2 between *quid sit Deus* and *qualis sit Deus*. Calvin readily accepts that it is important to articulate 'what is consistent with the nature of God': but he insists that we do so only in the light of God's self-disclosure. In other words, the movement in any discourse on the knowledge of God is always from actuality to possibility. We can speak of the possibility of the knowledge of God only in the light of the actuality of the knowledge of God. Only a primary concern with God-as-he-is-toward-us will keep a discussion of the essence of God within proper bounds.<sup>25</sup> The progression from Part I to Parts II and III of this thesis attempts to draw out the significance of this consistent theme in Calvin's thought, that we may speak of the possibility of the knowledge of God only in the light of its actuality.

#### NOTES

- 1 *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 edition): Letter to the Reader, p.4. Throughout the thesis quotations in English from the 1559 *Institutes* are taken from volumes XX and XXI of the Library of Christian Classics, edited by J. T. McNeill and translated by F. L. Battles. (S.C.M. Press, London/ Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1960). Page numbers refer to the same edition. The *Institutes* is cited as 'Inst.' hereafter: thus Inst. I.1.1 refers to Section 1 of Chapter 1 of Book I of The *Institutes* of 1559.
2. Inst.: Subject Matter, p.8.

- 3 The *Institutes* 'can be a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture', Inst.: Subject Matter, p. 7.
- 4 Inst. I. i. 1, p. 35.
- 5 F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (Collins, London 1963) p. 151.
- 6 Inst. I. v. 15, p. 68.
- 7 Inst. I. v. 9, p. 61.
- 8 Inst. I. iii. 3, p. 46.
- 9 Inst. I. v. 1, p. 51.
- 10 Inst. I. v. 13, p. 68.
- 11 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 12 Inst. I. xiii. 21, p. 146.
- 13 Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 41.
- 14 Inst. I. v. 1, p. 52; I. v. 9, p. 62.
- 15 Introductory Argument to the Commentary on Genesis, p. 60. (Hereafter cited as Comm. Gen. Arg. p. 60.) Throughout the thesis quotations in English from Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries are taken from the 26 volumes of the Calvin Translation Society edition (reprinted by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1979). Page numbers refer to the same edition.
- 16 Comm. Ezek. 1. 26, Vol. 1. 102. cf.: Comm. Ps. 8. 1, Vol. 1. 94.
- 17 Inst. I. x. 2, p. 97.
- 18 There is an obvious debt here to T. F. Torrance, "Knowledge of God and Speech about Him according to Calvin," in his *Theology in Reconstruction* (S. C. M. Press, London 1965) ch. 5.
- 19 Inst. Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France, p. 12.
- 20 Inst. P. A., p. 13.
- 21 Inst. I. iii. 1, p. 43.
- 22 Inst. I. iv. 1, p. 47.
- 23 T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (Lutterworth Press, London 1949) p. 29, n. 2.  
F. L. Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977) p. 19.
- 24 I. x. 2, p. 97.

- 25 Calvin's language about the Incarnate Word also urges this progression, from actuality to possibility, from powers to essence: eg.:

Faith should not cling only to the essence of Christ, so to say, but should pay heed to His power and office. For it would be little advantage to know who Christ is unless the second point is added of what he wishes to be towards us and for what purpose he was sent by the Father. Comm. John 1.49, p.43.

As Christ does not simply declare what He is in Himself, but what we should acknowledge Him to be, [this verse] records his power rather than his essence.

Comm. John 14.10, p.78.

Throughout the thesis quotations in English from Calvin's New Testament Commentaries are taken from the 12 volumes edited by D. W. and T. F. Torrance (St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh 1959-1972). Page numbers refer to the same edition.

**PART I:**  
**THE ACTUALITY OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE WORD OF GOD.**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Calvin's theology proceeds from the premise that the initiative for all knowledge of God rests with God himself, and that God has taken that initiative in his Word. All knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God. This emphasis on the mediating function of the Word inevitably affects the shape of Calvin's theology, introducing an essentially trinitarian dynamic to the logic behind it by the interpolation of *the Word of God* between *the nature of God* and *the knowledge of God*. This point and its implications are not often registered. The mediating function of the Word of God in Calvin's theology gives to the knowledge of God an inner form which is antecedently trinitarian: *the nature of God* is known only when *the Word of God* mediates *the knowledge of God*.

In Part One of this thesis, the object is to trace the implications for the content of Calvin's theology of this essentially trinitarian logic which is its premise. An attempt is made to assess how Calvin's emphasis on the mediated character of all knowledge of God gives shape to the actual content of the knowledge of God. The question addressed in Part One is how far the actual content of the mediated knowledge of God as Calvin expounds it may be said to be 'trinitarian'.

The secondary question of how the mediating Word of God relates to the nature of God itself (that is, how Calvin develops his doctrine of the Trinity and how he accounts for the possibility of the knowledge of God in the Word of God) is deferred to Parts Two and Three. For the most part, studies of Calvin's theology have attended to the latter question at the expense of the former. In practise this has too often meant that Calvin's treatment of the Trinity has been considered outside the context of the knowledge of God in which it is found in the *Institutes*. This separation

represents an inversion of the movement from actuality to possibility which is so characteristic of Calvin's theological method.

### **The Actuality of the Knowledge of God: the *Duplex Cognitio Dei*.**

In *Institutes* I.11.1, Calvin addresses for the first time the actual content of the knowledge of God. He writes that

First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture, the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ... he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting two-fold knowledge of God we shall now discuss the first aspect; the second will be dealt with in its proper place.<sup>1</sup>

In this important passage,<sup>2</sup> Calvin draws attention to what he takes to be the essential feature of all true knowledge of God: its two-fold character. At the same time he explains the order in which he proposes to deal with the two aspects of this knowledge in the definitive and re-arranged edition of the *Institutes*: he will first discuss '*Cognitio Dei Creatoris*' which may be derived as much from the fashioning of the universe as from the general teaching of Scripture (Book I), and only then move the discussion on to '*Cognitio Dei Redemptoris*', which is to be sought exclusively in the face of Christ (Book II).

### **The Trinitarian Character of the Knowledge of God:**

It is important to be clear about what Calvin means by the phrase 'the *duplex cognitio Dei*'. Despite a good deal of confusion in the secondary literature, it ought surely to be evident that in the term 'the two-fold knowledge of God', Calvin is not introducing a distinction between the knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves,<sup>3</sup> nor between the knowledge of God the Father and the knowledge of God the Son,<sup>4</sup> nor in the first instance between two sources for the knowledge of God.<sup>5</sup> The primary distinction intended by Calvin is between the two aspects that he perceives to belong essentially to the actual character of all true knowledge of God: the

knowledge of God first, as the Creator and secondly, as the Redeemer.

It is to be stressed that the *duplex cognitio* does not make a direct or explicit distinction between the persons of the Trinity. When Calvin speaks of a two-fold knowledge of God, he is not referring to the persons in whom, but to the activities in which, the one Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is known. The subject matter of the first two books of the *Institutes* is not the first two members of the Trinity: it is the two ways - as Creator and as Redeemer - in which, according to Calvin, the One Triune God is known in his divine activity. As Parker puts it,

A distinction is made between the knowledge of God as the Creator, and the knowledge of God as the Redeemer. These are not two knowledges, of course, or we should be forced to say that there were two objects and so divorce the Creator from the Redeemer. It is one knowledge with one object, but with the one object contemplated from two sides.<sup>6</sup>

It will be argued that the function of the *duplex cognitio Dei* in Calvin's theology is to assert that the One Triune God encounters humankind in two ways, in his creative and his redemptive activities; that this two-fold knowing is characteristic of all true knowledge of God; and that all three members of the Trinity are involved in each of the two ways in which God encounters humankind.

#### **The Christological Sources of the Knowledge of God:**

It should however be noted that there is also a reference in this passage - though an incidental one - to the sources of the knowledge of God. While his primary purpose is to distinguish between the two aspects of the content of our knowledge of God, Calvin states in passing that the Lord shows himself to be the Creator 'in the fashioning of the creation' and 'the general teaching of Scripture', and that he shows himself to be the Redeemer 'in the face of Christ'. It will be argued that Calvin takes these sources to be expressions (if not of the same order) of the Word of God, which, as such, are consistently Christological.

**Chapter 1: The Mediation of the Knowledge of God in the Eternal Word of God.**

This chapter takes up the question of the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Eternal Word of God. It is not only creation itself which is mediated by the Eternal Word. It will be argued that Calvin also assumes a primary correlation between the mediating function of the Eternal Word of God and the *cognitio Dei Creatoris*. The sources of the knowledge of God the Creator to which Calvin refers (the fashioning of creation, and the general teaching of Scripture) are expressions of the Eternal Word of God and are therefore consistently Christological. It will be argued that 'the two-fold relation' of the Eternal Word of God serves to guarantee the genuinely trinitarian content of the knowledge it mediates.

**Chapter 2: The Mediation of the Knowledge of God in the Incarnate Word of God.**

This chapter takes up the question of the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Incarnate Word of God. It is not only redemption itself which is mediated by the Incarnate Word. It will be argued that Calvin also assumes a primary correlation between the mediating function of the Incarnate Word and the *cognitio Dei Redemptoris*. The suggestion is made that the *extra Calvinisticum* serves to relate the source to which Calvin refers (the face of Christ) to the Eternal Word of God; and that as a result of this relationship the actual content of the knowledge mediated by the Incarnate Word is genuinely trinitarian.

**Chapter 3: The Mediation of the Knowledge of God in Scripture.**

This chapter focusses upon the question of the mediation of the knowledge of God in Scripture. It will be argued that just as it is the function of the Eternal Word of God to mediate creation and the *cognitio Dei Creatoris*, and of the Incarnate Word to mediate redemption and the

*cognitio Dei Redemptoris*, so it is the function of Scripture to mediate teaching, and the two-fold knowledge of God.

NOTES:

- 1 Inst. I.ii.1, p.40: 'the resulting two-fold knowledge of God' is a rendering of the Latin: *hinc duplex emergit eius cognitio*.
- 2 The significance of the passage was established by E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Columbia University Press, New York 1952).
- 3 The phrase was misunderstood in this way, at least at one stage, by T. H. L. Parker. In the first American edition of *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Grand Rapids MI, 1959), p.119, Parker took the phrase to refer the opening sentence of the Institutes: he understood the *duplex cognitio Dei* to be 'the knowledge of God and of ourselves.' But as he himself later conceded, (Parker, *Doctrine*, p.8), this is hardly a '*duplex cognitio*' at all, let alone a '*duplex cognitio Dei/Domini*'. By 'knowledge of God and of ourselves' Calvin is speaking of two distinct knowledges' - the two objects of theology - rather than one 'two-fold knowledge' - the one object of all true knowledge of God. Gamble also appears to misunderstand the phrase in this way in his otherwise useful article: "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete: is there anything new?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988) p.186.
- 4 This point is developed below, p.21. It is surprisingly common to find scholars adopting as a simple - if misleading - 'shorthand' in speaking of Books I and II of the *Institutes* as if their subjects were, respectively, God the Father and God the Son. See for instance: A. E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin - A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Blackwells, Oxford 1990) p.152; Wendel: *Calvin*; p.120-121.
- 5 As Dowey (correcting Barth's misunderstanding) puts it, this distinction is 'not identical with the distinction between general and special revelation, that is, with the revelation in creation and in Scripture'. Dowey: *Knowledge*, p.43.
- 6 T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (rev. ed. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1969) p.8-9.

- CHAPTER 1 -

THE MEDIATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE ETERNAL WORD OF GOD.

**Introduction:**

Calvin's theology proceeds from the premise that the initiative for all knowledge of God rests with God himself, and that God has taken that initiative in his Word. All knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God: the nature of God is known only when the Word of God mediates the knowledge of God.

This statement is not as straightforward as it sounds, however, since the term 'the Word of God' is not only one that Calvin uses frequently,<sup>1</sup> but also one he applies to more than one single referent. As he himself put it, 'all divinely uttered revelations are correctly designated by the term, "word of God"'.<sup>2</sup> So it is that in one place Calvin will speak of Scripture as the Word of God;<sup>3</sup> in another he will refer to individual prophetic oracles in the same way.<sup>4</sup> Here he writes that the gospel is the Word of God;<sup>5</sup> there that the preacher, assuming he performs his task truly, preaches the Word of God.<sup>6</sup>

All these 'divinely uttered' forms of the Word of God are derivative, moreover. In a passage around which much of Calvin's exposition of the knowledge of God the Creator in Book I of the *Institutes* may be said to pivot, he makes a clear distinction between these, and the 'Substantial' Word, who 'abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself' in the second person of the Trinity. Calvin speaks of the Son of God, as the 'eternal and essential Word of the Father'.<sup>7</sup> The distinction is an important one: as 'divinely uttered revelations', Calvin undoubtedly attributes a mediating function to Scripture, prophetic oracles, sermons and the like, with regard to the knowledge of God. It is the office of the Word of God in all its forms to mediate the knowledge of God. Derived forms of the Word of God, however, have this office only by virtue of their

derivation. By contrast, the Eternal or Essential Word of God has this mediating function essentially. It is with the mediating function of the Eternal Word of God that this chapter is particularly concerned.

**The Word of God as the Mediator and the *Duplex Cognitio Dei*:**

It has been noted that Calvin distinguishes between two aspects of the knowledge of God: the knowledge of God as Creator and the knowledge of God as Redeemer. It is not often recognised that this *duplex cognitio Dei* exercises a decisive role in Calvin's understanding of the Word of God as the Mediator. For the primary categories in Calvin's understanding of the work of the Word of God as Mediator are the mediation of creation and the mediation of redemption. Moreover, Calvin identifies the mediation of creation and the mediation of redemption as being in some particular way the work of the Eternal Word of God and of the Incarnate Word of God respectively.

Standard expositions of the work of the Mediator in Calvin's theology tend to confine their attention to the mediation of the knowledge of God to fallen Adam in the Person of the Redeemer.<sup>29</sup> It is noted in the secondary literature that the understanding of the work of the Mediator as the Redeemer is something that Calvin 'inherited from the tradition'.<sup>30</sup> But it is important not to miss the second strand of Calvin's understanding of the mediating function of the Word of God: according to Calvin it is not only redemption but also creation which is mediated by the Word of God.

It is, nevertheless, undeniable that the reason the mediation of creation receives less attention in studies of Calvin's thought than the mediation of redemption is simply that Calvin has less to say about it. In the *Institutes*, as in his theological writings generally, Calvin's chief concern is with the mediation of redemption. When he speaks of the person of the Mediator, for instance, he undoubtedly intends a particular

identification with the person of the Redeemer: in contrast, Calvin nowhere speaks of the person of the Mediator as the Creator.<sup>10</sup> As Willis puts it: 'when he speaks of the Mediator without any explicit or contextual qualifications, Calvin means the One Person formed by the *assumptio carnis*'.<sup>11</sup> It is not necessary to look any further than the *Institutes* to establish this particular identification. At times Calvin uses the terms 'the Mediator', 'the Redeemer' and 'Christ' almost interchangeably, as, for example, in the way he constantly defers speaking of the Mediator until he is 'ready to speak of the Redeemer.'<sup>12</sup>

But to confine discussion of the Word of God as the Mediator to the person of the Redeemer would be as much a distortion of Calvin's theology as it is to blur this primary identification of the two. For although Calvin makes no identification between the person of the Mediator and the person of the Creator, and although the mediation of creation by the Word of God is a subject treated less often and developed less fully by Calvin than the mediation of redemption, nevertheless, its presence in his theology is beyond doubt.

It is not just that it is possible to cite examples of passages in which Calvin refers to the mediation of creation by the Word of God, although this can be done easily enough.<sup>13</sup> It is rather that it is possible to show - albeit from one of his less well known writings - that Calvin relates his understanding of the Word of God as Mediator to the *duplex cognitio Dei* more closely, speaking of creation and redemption as separate but related aspects of the work of the Mediator. The document concerned is a letter Calvin wrote *Ad Fratres Polonos*, where Calvin sets out his belief that

The name of Mediator applies to Christ not only because he took on flesh or because he took on the office of reconciling the human race with God. But already from the beginning of creation he was truly Mediator because he was always the Head of the Church and held primacy even over the angels and was the first-born of all creatures (Eph. 1.2; Col. 1.15ff; Col. 2.10). Whence we conclude that he began to

perform the office of Mediator not only after the fall of Adam but insofar as he is the Eternal Son of God, angels as well as men were joined to God in order that they might remain upright... It is unthinkingly inferred from the title of Mediator that he is inferior to the Father, since these things go well together, that the only-begotten Son of God was both God in one essence with the Father and yet was a kind of medium between God and creatures so that life, which would otherwise have been hidden in God, should pour forth from him. Next we add that although he was predestined Mediator following the alienation of man from God and afterwards exhibited Mediator in another way, indeed as Mediator who would restore the lost race of man to life by expiating sins, nevertheless in this person of the Mediator he was the Head no less of the angels than of men.<sup>14</sup>

The passage contends firstly that Christ was truly Mediator 'from the beginning of creation', secondly that it is through the mediation of the Eternal Son of God that 'angels... were joined to God in order that they might remain upright', and thirdly, that 'the only-begotten Son of God... was a kind of medium between God and creatures so that life... should pour forth from him.' The point is clear enough: the Eternal Word of God is the Mediator of creation. In the same passage the more traditional concept of the Word of God as the Mediator of redemption is also explicit. In his discussion of this passage, Willis has suggested that:

Calvin here subjects the idea of mediation to two different nuances: mediation as reconciliation and mediation as sustenance. As reconciler, the Mediator was ordained because of the fall to restore the broken relationship between God and man. As sustainer, the Mediator always was the way creation was preserved and ordered.<sup>15</sup>

But this description of the double nuance is not as clear as it might be. Willis obscures the relationship between the office of Mediator and the *duplex cognitio Dei*. For Calvin, it is not only the order of creation which depends upon the Mediator, but *creation* itself.

The only-begotten Son of God was both God in one essence with the Father and yet was a kind of medium between God and creatures so that life, which would otherwise have been hidden in God, should pour forth from him.<sup>16</sup>

The double nuance, then, in Calvin's understanding of the Mediator is not so much mediation as sustenance on the one hand, and mediation as reconciliation on the other (which is the distinction Willis makes), but

the mediation of creation (which is subsequently sustained by the same Mediator) on the one hand, and the mediation of redemption (which is also sustained, presumably, in the same way by the same Mediator) on the other.<sup>17</sup> The notion of a two-fold mediation is also present in Calvin's commentary on the opening verses of St. John's Gospel:

There are two distinct powers of the Son of God. The first appears in the architecture of the world and in the order of nature. By the second He renews and restores fallen nature.<sup>18</sup>

This distinction may be taken one stage further. For the Word of God not only functions as the Mediator of creation and redemption for Calvin, but also as the Mediator of the *duplex cognitio Dei*, the knowledge of God as Creator and the knowledge of God as Redeemer. The relationship between the mediation of creation and the mediation of the knowledge of God the Creator, and also between the mediation of redemption and the mediation of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, bears very directly on Calvin's notion of Scripture as the Word of God, about which there is more to be said below.<sup>19</sup> For the present it is sufficient to note that Calvin does extend his understanding of the mediation of the Word of God in this way. For instance: speaking of the patriarchs, Calvin insists that,

it was necessary [for them] to recognise God not only as Creator but also as Redeemer, for undoubtedly they arrived at both from the Word.<sup>20</sup>

When Calvin speaks of mediation, then, there is a primary emphasis in his thought upon the mediation of redemption and of the knowledge of God the Redeemer: when he speaks of the Mediator without further qualification, he refers to the person of the Redeemer, the Incarnate Word of God. But Calvin develops his understanding of the mediating function of the Word of God as far as to include the mediation of creation and of the knowledge of God the Creator: moreover, there is in Calvin's thought an identification of the mediation of creation and of the knowledge of God the Creator as the particular activity of the Eternal Word of God.

### **The Mediating Function of the Eternal Word of God:**

Although the mediation of creation and of the knowledge of God the Creator is discussed less often by Calvin, and is developed less fully than the mediation of redemption and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, it is actually the more innovative part of his understanding of the mediating function of the Word of God, and it warrants full attention for that reason. As the Letter to the Polish Brethren indicates, Calvin attributes to the Eternal Word of God the function of mediating the creation. It emerges that this involves not simply bringing the creation into being, nor simply continuing to sustain and regulate the created order: it also involves the mediation of the knowledge of God the Creator.

### **The Mediation of Creation:**

The letter to the Polish Brethren is unusual in the degree to which it applies the language of mediation to the creation and preservation of the universe by the Eternal Word of God: as a general rule, Calvin tends to restrict the explicit use of the language of mediation to the subject of redemption. The idea, on the other hand, that the universe was originally created through the Eternal Word of God, and that it is continually sustained through him, is relatively common in the Reformer's writings. That is to say, the concept of the mediation of creation by the Eternal Word of God is present, even if the language of mediation is not.

There are good examples of this in the Commentaries, as one might expect. 'Believers', he says,

understand the power of the Word not only as shown at the moment of the creating of the world but as continually displayed in its preservation.<sup>21</sup>

And on John 1.4, Calvin writes:

So far, [the evangelist] has taught us that all things were created by the Word of God. He now likewise attributes to Him the preservation of what had been created; as if he were saying that in the creation of the world His power did not simply suddenly appear only to pass away,

but that it is visible in the permanence of the stable and settled order of nature - just as Heb. 1.3 says that he upholds all things by the Word or command of his power... The simple meaning is that the Word of God was not only the fount of life to all creatures, so that those which had not yet existed began to be, but that His life-giving power makes them remain in their state.<sup>22</sup>

What of the *Institutes*, however? If the idea that creation is mediated by the Word of God is anything like a consistent feature of Calvin's thought, one would expect to find it present there.

It transpires that in the very passage in which Calvin sets out his understanding of the Eternal Word of God, he not only refers to the creation and the preservation of the universe by the Word, but includes at least an echo of the language of mediation:

'Word' means the everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth. For, as Peter testifies, the ancient prophets spoke by the Spirit of Christ just as much as the apostles did, and all who thereafter ministered the heavenly doctrine. Indeed, because Christ had not yet been manifested, it is necessary to understand the Word as begotten of the Father before time... And Moses clearly teaches this in the creation of the universe, setting forth this Word as intermediary [*intermedium*]. For why does he expressly tell us that God in his individual acts of creation spoke, Let this or that be done unless so that the unsearchable glory of God may shine forth in his image? It would be easy for censorious babblers to get around this, saying that the Word is to be understood as a bidding or command. But the apostles are better interpreters, who teach that the world was made through the Son, and that he upholds all things by his powerful word.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage Calvin's purpose is to 'demonstrate the deity of the Son'. He chooses to do this by arguing that the Son or Word of God was 'begotten of the Father before time'. We know this, he says, because Moses teaches that the Word was the '*intermedium*' when the world was created; and besides, there is the testimony of the apostles that 'the world was made through the Son', who 'upholds all things'. Creation, once brought into being, is sustained by the mediation of the Eternal Word of God.

**The Mediation of the Knowledge of God as Creator in the Eternal Word of God:**

'We know God, who is himself invisible, only through his works'.<sup>24</sup>  
This is, for Calvin, what he might call 'a settled principle'.

The principle has a negative aspect: it implies that the knowledge of God is not immediate, and has never been so. It has only ever been possible for human creatures to come to a knowledge of God, not as he is in himself but as he encounters his creatures in his works. In this context what amounts to a casual aside in the *Institutes* takes on added significance. In a passage furnishing 'Reasons why it was necessary that the Mediator should be God and should become man', Calvin seeks to establish that none of Adam's children could serve as an intermediary between God and man. Why? Because, he continues,

Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator.<sup>25</sup>

The implication seems to be that, even in his state of original righteousness, Adam was dependent upon the Mediator for his knowledge of God - even that 'primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright.'<sup>26</sup>

This last statement is a reminder that the Reformer's 'settled principle' has its positive aspect too, however. At least in Calvin's thought, to say that 'we know God only through his works' means that whenever we are confronted with his works, we are always confronted with God himself. This is why Calvin presses beyond a consideration of the mediation of creation in Book I of the *Institutes*, to a consideration of the mediation of the knowledge of God by the Eternal Word. As he puts it in the 'Argument' to his Genesis Commentary,

This is the reason why the Lord, that he may invite us to the knowledge of himself, places the fabric of heaven and earth before our eyes, rendering himself, in a certain manner, manifest in them. For God - by other means invisible - (as we have already said) clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which

he would present himself to our contemplation.<sup>27</sup>

When Calvin says that

The knowledge of God shines forth in the fashioning of the Universe and the Continuing Government of it.<sup>28</sup>

he means that creation functions as the source for the knowledge of God by virtue of the fact that it is mediated by the Word of God. Since the eternal Word of God is the lively and express image of God, and because the worlds were made by the Word, the image of God may be contemplated in them.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, [the essence of God] is incomprehensible; hence his divineness escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory'. [The] skilful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.<sup>30</sup>

Because the universe has its origin in the Word of God, and is in some sense an expression of the Word of God, Calvin speaks of it as the likeness or representation of him (*eius effigiem*).<sup>31</sup>

According to Calvin, because the universe is mediated by the Word of God, the contemplation of it would have led us to the knowledge of God the Creator 'if Adam had remained upright'. If it had not been for the ruin of humankind, the way in which God offers himself for human contemplation in the created order would have been sufficient for this. As it is, however, because of the weakness and frailty of humanity (Calvin does not spell out the relation this has to the fall of Adam until the first six chapters of Book II), it is

in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Christological Sources of the Knowledge of God the Creator:**

Interpreters of Calvin are agreed about the value the created order would have continued to have, '*si integer stetisset Adam*'. There is substantially less agreement about the role of the created order in

relation to the knowledge of God, given that Adam did not remain upright.<sup>33</sup> The difficulties are mitigated if it is kept in mind that the created order is mediated by the Eternal Word of God.

It is clear, of course, that according to Calvin the creation is no longer sufficient as a source for the knowledge of God. But the shortcoming in this present circumstance lies entirely with humanity:

Although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull towards so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us.<sup>34</sup>

The voice of God still calls to us through the created order: it is the ability of humanity to hear this voice which has failed. Whereas the voice of God sounding through the creation was originally enough to lead humanity to recognise its Creator, now it serves only to leave human beings inexcusable. This is the residual effect - what Dowey calls the accidental purpose<sup>35</sup> - of God's self-presentation in creation.<sup>36</sup>

We must therefore make this distinction, that the manifestation of God by which He makes His own glory known among His creatures is sufficiently clear as far as its own light is concerned. It is, however, inadequate on account of our own blindness. But we are not so blind that we can plead ignorance without being convicted of perversity... We see just enough to keep us from making excuse.<sup>37</sup>

As far as God is concerned, his presence is still portrayed in his works; but because of the corruption of the human capacity to recognise him there, by divine condescension another source of the knowledge of God has been added.

God... sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe.<sup>38</sup>

There are, then, as Calvin indicates at the point at which he first distinguishes in the *Institutes* between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, two sources of this 'primal and simple knowledge'<sup>39</sup>: creation and Scripture.

It is important to be clear about the relation of these two sources to one another. Insofar as it was added as a remedy, a certain priority is now given to Scripture.

Therefore, however fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theatre to be a spectator of them, it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word, the better to profit.<sup>40</sup>

As far as fallen Adam is concerned, Scripture is a better source for the knowledge of God the Creator than the created order is: but Scripture and creation are not rival sources for this knowledge, or sources in any way in competition with each other. 'The special revelation of the Creator in Scripture is not a substitute revelation, a completely new picture placed before the eyes'.<sup>41</sup>

Calvin himself recognises that his meaning may be misunderstood at this point, and seeks to clarify the relation of Scripture to creation as sources for the knowledge of the Creator. 'It is', he says,

worthwhile to ponder whether the Lord represents himself to us in Scripture as we previously saw him delineate himself in his works.<sup>42</sup>

He concludes that he does.

Nothing is set down [in Scripture<sup>43</sup>] that cannot be beheld in his creatures. Indeed with experience as our teacher we find God just as he declares himself in his Word.<sup>44</sup>

And again:

The knowledge of God set forth for us in Scripture is destined for the very same goal as the knowledge whose imprint shines in his creatures, in that it invites us first to fear God and then to trust him.<sup>45</sup>

Returning to the theme of the knowledge of God the Creator at *Institutes* I. x. 1 (after his excursion of the authority of Scripture in I. vii-ix), Calvin summarises the argument of I. i-vi as follows:

We have taught that the knowledge of God, otherwise quite clearly set forth in the system of the universe and in all creatures, is nonetheless more intimately and also more vividly revealed in his Word.<sup>46</sup>

God is revealed more intimately and more vividly in Scripture than

in his creatures, but not differently. The Scriptures do not contradict the self-presentation of God in his creation, nor do they make it redundant. In fact the Scriptures rehabilitate the created order as a source of the knowledge of God. This is the point of Calvin's analogy of the spectacles.

In describing the world as a mirror in which we ought to behold God, I would not be understood to assert, either that our eyes are sufficiently clear-sighted to discern what the fabric of heaven and earth represents, or that the knowledge to be hence attained is sufficient for salvation... Whereas the Lord invites us to himself by the means of created things, with no other effect than that of thereby rendering us inexcusable, he has added (as was necessary) a new remedy, or at least by a new aid, he has assisted the ignorance of our mind. For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, he not only makes things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them; as if he had assisted our dull sight with spectacles.<sup>47</sup>

The Scriptures are the spectacles which (in Parker's memorable phrase<sup>48</sup>) 'transform chaos into cosmos', and render the image of God visible again in his creation.

When, in *Institutes* I.ii.1, Calvin first distinguishes between the knowledge of God as the Creator, and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, he also mentions the sources for these two aspects of the knowledge of God:

First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture, the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ, he shows himself the Redeemer.<sup>49</sup>

The conclusion which emerges from a proper consideration of the mediating function of the Eternal Word of God, is that the sources to which Calvin refers here are consistently christological. There is more to be said in Chapter 2 about the knowledge of God the Redeemer; for the moment it is enough to notice that Calvin identifies the face of Christ - the Incarnate Word - as the sole source for it. As far as the knowledge of God the Creator is concerned, Calvin directs us to the fashioning of the universe and the general teaching of Scripture. Both

of these are mediated by the Eternal Word of God: and it is their common origin in the Eternal Word which accounts for the compatibility of Scripture and the created order as sources for the knowledge of God the Creator. To this extent it may be said that in Calvin's thought it is ultimately to the Eternal Word that we are driven as the source for this knowledge of God.

### **The Trinitarian Content of the Knowledge of God the Creator:**

Calvin asserts that 'Nothing is set down [in Scripture] that cannot be beheld in his creatures. Indeed with experience as our teacher we find God just as he declares himself in his Word'.<sup>50</sup> It is - so this thesis maintains - their common origin in the Eternal Word which accounts for their compatibility as sources for the knowledge of God the Creator. The question remains how far the content of the knowledge of God mediated in the Eternal Word may be said to be trinitarian.

Dowey summarises the way in which two sources of the knowledge of God the Creator compare with one another in terms of its content:

The content is identical up to a point: both [Scripture and the creation] teach the eternity and self-existence, power, wisdom, truth, goodness, righteousness, justice, mercy, and holiness of God, and both reveal identically God's orderly will for his creation, the former in conscience and the latter in the Mosaic moral law. The revelation in Scripture, however, goes beyond what can be learned from creation since the Fall (1) in teaching of the Trinity, (2) in giving the time and manner of creation, plus an angelology, a demonology, and a picture of man's original state, and (3) in revealing the full scope of God's particular providence.<sup>51</sup>

Scripture never contradicts the self-presentation of God in creation; it does however go beyond it. According to Dowey,

It goes without saying that Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity is exclusively Biblical in origin.<sup>52</sup>

This is certainly the case: Calvin does not argue for the manifestation of a *doctrine* of the Trinity in the fashioning of the Universe. However, his emphasis on the self-presentation of God in his

acts does give Calvin grounds to assert *the trinitarian nature* of God apart from the explicit teaching of Scripture.

It has already been observed that the interpolation of the Word of God between the nature of God and the knowledge of God introduces an essentially trinitarian dynamic to the logic behind Calvin's theology. The mediating function of the Word of God gives to the knowledge of God a form that is antecedently trinitarian: the nature of God is known only when the Word of God mediates the knowledge of God. This trinitarian form underlies the knowledge of God the Creator.

To say that 'we know God, who is himself invisible, only through his works' is not to deny that all knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God. For the works of God - in particular the creative works of God, the *opera Dei* to which Calvin refers in *Institutes* I.v - are themselves mediated by the Word of God. Thus we may say that the knowledge of God mediated by the creative activity of God is similarly antecedently trinitarian in form: the nature of God is known only when the activity of God mediates the knowledge of God.

Calvin comes closest to an explicit acknowledgement of this dynamic in a passage in which he differentiates the persons of the Trinity. It is highly significant that he does so in terms of their relation to the activity of God.

To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things (*ipsaque in rebus agendis dispensatio*); but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.<sup>53</sup>

In other words: when God gives himself to be known in his works, he gives himself to be known as Trinity, in that his activity has a beginning, a dispensation, and an effect. In the creative activity of God, therefore, the Trinity is manifest: the Father in the origin of that activity, the Son in its ordered disposition (is 'disposition'

[*dispensatio*] in effect equivalent to 'mediation' here?) and the Spirit in its power and efficacy.

According to Calvin, then, the knowledge of God the Creator is not a knowledge of any single member of the Trinity, but a knowledge of the One Triune God in his creative activity. For Calvin, as Parker puts it,

There can, since the essence of God is simple, be no question of one Person of the Trinity acting in isolation from the other persons. Every work of God is a work of God Himself; that is, of the entire Godhead.<sup>54</sup>

This dynamic may also account for a curious feature of *Institutes* Book I, namely Calvin's tendency to identify a trinity of attributes in God (that is, of active divine *virtutes*, rather than static qualities).

When Calvin seeks to explain what it is about God that is manifest in his creative activity, he commonly refers to certain attributes of God. Frequently, he will relate a particular attribute to a particular aspect of the creation. Thus 'if the cause is sought by which he was led once to create all these things, and is now moved to preserve them, we shall find that it is his goodness alone' (I. v. 6); 'his power shows itself clearly when the ferocity of the impious is overcome' (I. v. 8); and so on. But repeatedly - although not with absolute consistency - Calvin focuses upon three attributes in particular: the righteousness (or goodness) of God, the wisdom of God and the power of God. This is so especially when he considers the Creation as a whole, rather than particular aspects of it. Even carnal sense, for instance, can see 'the wisdom, power and goodness of the author in accomplishing such handiwork'.<sup>55</sup> Again, although 'the wisdom, power and righteousness' of the invisible God are incomprehensible, nevertheless, the creation history as it is recorded in Scripture is set before us 'as in a mirror in which his living likeness glows'.<sup>56</sup> By the same token, 'certain philosophers, accordingly, long ago ineptly called man a microcosm

because he is a rare example of God's power, goodness and wisdom'.<sup>57</sup>

Given the explicit identification that runs throughout the *Institutes*, and indeed Calvin's whole theological corpus, of the Son as the Wisdom of God, and the Spirit as the Power of God, some kind of a case can be made that Calvin is assuming a correspondence of these various powers of God with the three persons of the Trinity. It is not a great step to pass from saying that in the fashioning of the universe the goodness, wisdom and power of God are manifest, to saying that in the fashioning of the universe the three persons of the Trinity are manifest.

Of course Scripture goes beyond the created order in providing explicit teaching on the subject of the Trinity. But Calvin's emphasis on the self-presentation of God in his works, leaves no doubt that he understands the created order to testify to the activity of one God in three persons.

#### **Conclusion:**

In his Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, Calvin speaks of 'a two-fold relation' of the Eternal Word of God. 'The Word has a two-fold relation,' he writes, 'to God and to men.'<sup>58</sup> This idea plays such an important role in Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity and in establishing the very possibility of the knowledge of God, and is introduced in the Commentary in that context, that it will be discussed more fully in the appropriate chapter below. But it is important to observe at this point, that the 'two-fold relation' of the Eternal Word has considerable implications for the actuality of the knowledge of God as well.

The point of the *duplex cognitio*, as we have already suggested, is to distinguish between the Creator and the Redeemer, not as persons of

the Trinity or as the sources of the knowledge of God but as the twin aspects of the knowledge of God: the *duplex cognitio* makes a distinction between the two activities by which the one trinitarian God is manifested to mankind. Given that this knowledge is mediated by the Eternal Word, it follows that the two-fold relation of the Word of God serves to bind the actuality of the knowledge of God to both the sources of the knowledge of God and the persons of the Trinity in their activity. For the relation of the Word of God 'to men' defines the sources of the knowledge of God the Creator as consistently christological. And the relation of the Word of God 'to God' relates the content of the two-fold knowledge of God directly to the persons of the Trinity in their activity. Because of the relation of the Word of God 'to God', the content of the knowledge of God the Creator is inevitably trinitarian.

#### NOTES

1 In his *Computerised Concordance to the Institutio Christianae Religionis 1559 of Ioannes Calvinus* (The Clifford E. Barbour Library, Pittsburgh Theological Library, Pittsburgh PA 1972), F. L. Battles lists 74 examples of *sermo (Dei)* in the 1559 *Institutes*, and 78 examples of *verbum (Dei)* in Book I alone.

2 Inst. I.xiii.7, p.130.

3 eg.: Inst. I.vi.3, p.73; Inst. IV.viii.6, p.1153.

4 eg.: Inst. I.xii.7, p.129.

See also:

Comm Hag. 1.12, p.341: The Word of God is not distinguished from the word of the prophet.

5 eg.: Inst. III.v.5, p.675.

6 eg.: Comm. 2 Timothy 3.15, p.329.

7 Inst. I.xiii.7, p.129.

- 8 J. F. Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (James Clarke and Co. Ltd., London 1956) is an obvious example; P. van Buren, *Christ in our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1957) is another.
- 9 E. D. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1966) p. 67.
- 10 That is to say, no such reference is known to me.
- 11 Willis: *Christology*, p. 68.
- 12 Eg: Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 40; I. vi. 1, p. 71; I. x. 1, p. 97; I. xiii. 9, p. 131; I. xiii. 24, p. 151.
- 13 See below, pp. 29-30.
- 14 *Responsum ad Fratres Polonos*, CO: 9. 338, cited by Willis: *Christology*, p. 70. (Throughout the thesis a reference such as CO: 9. 338 is to the relevant volume and page of *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by W. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (C. A. Schwetscke, Brunswick 1863-1900). This work was unavailable to me.
- 15 Willis: *Christology*, p. 70.
- 16 *Responsum ad Fratres Polonos*, CO: 9. 338, cited by Willis: *Christology*, p. 70.
- 17 On the mediation of redemption and its subsequent preservation see Chapter 2.
- 18 Comm. John 1. 5, pp. 12-13.
- 19 See Chapter 3.
- 20 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 70.
- 21 Comm. Heb. 11. 2, p. 159.
- 22 Comm. John 1. 4, pp. 10-11.
- 23 Inst. I. xiii. 7, p. 129.
- 24 Comm. Gen. Arg., p. 59.
- 25 Inst. II. xii. 1, p. 465.
- 26 Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 40.
- 27 Comm Gen Arg, pp. 59-60. cf.: Inst. I. v. 9, p. 62.
- 28 Inst. I. v. T, p. 51.
- 29 Comm. Gen. Arg., p. 63.
- 30 Inst. I. v. 1, p. 52-53.
- 31 Inst. I. v. 6., p. 59; I. xiv. 1, p. 160.

- 32 Inst. I. v. 14, p. 68.
- 33 The debate which took place on this subject in Germany in the first half of this century is well summarised in Dowey: *Knowledge*, Appendix III.
- 34 Inst. I. v. 11, p. 63.
- 35 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p. 82.
- 36 Comm. Gen. Arg., p. 62.
- 37 Comm. Rom. 1.20, pp. 31-32.
- 38 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 69.
- 39 Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 40.
- 40 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 41 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p. 144.
- 42 Inst. I. x. 1, p. 96.
- 43 Calvin refers specifically only to Psalm 145 - but he has chosen this Psalm as the essence of the testimony of all Scripture to the Creator.
- 44 Inst. I. x. 2, p. 98.
- 45 Inst. I. x. 2, p. 98.
- 46 Inst. I. x. 1, p. 96.
- 47 Comm. Gen. Arg. p. 62. cf. Inst. I, vi. 1, p. 70.
- 48 Parker: *Doctrine*, p. 81.
- 49 Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 40.
- 50 Inst. I. x. 2, p. 98.
- 51 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p. 131.
- 52 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p. 145.
- 53 Inst. I. xiii. 18, p. 143.
- 54 Parker: *Doctrine*, p. 93.
- 55 Inst. I. xvi. 1, p. 197.
- 56 Inst. I. xiv. 1, p. 160.
- 57 Inst. I. v. 3, p. 54. See also Comm. Gen. Arg. p. 63; Comm. Jer. 10.1-2, Vol. 2 p. 8; Comm. Pss. 145 and 147 Arg, Vol. 5, pp. 271 and 291; Geneva Cat., p. 94.
- 58 Comm. John 1. 1, p. 7.

- CHAPTER 2 -

THE MEDIATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD.

**Introduction:**

Calvin's theology proceeds from the premise that the initiative for all knowledge of God rests with God himself, and that God has taken that initiative in his Word. All knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God: the nature of God is known only when the Word of God mediates the knowledge of God.

In Chapter 1 the observation was made that Calvin distinguishes (in *Institutes* I.xiii.7) between the 'eternal and essential Word of the Father' who 'abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself', and 'all divinely uttered revelations'. The latter, while they are 'correctly designated by the term "word of God"', are so only derivatively. According to Calvin, even divinely uttered revelations have a mediating function with regard to the knowledge of God; but they have this office derivatively too. The Eternal Word of God, by contrast, has this function essentially.

This distinction raises a question about the mediating function of the Incarnate Word of God. What does it mean to speak of the man Jesus Christ as 'the Word of God'? Does the term 'the Word of God' belong to the man Jesus Christ essentially or derivatively?

This is, of course, an important question, and Calvin is alert to its significance. For if the man Jesus Christ is the Word of God only derivatively, then he has his mediating function only derivatively. If on the other hand the man Jesus Christ is the Mediator essentially, then it can only be because there is an essential continuity between the Eternal Word of God and the Word made flesh.

It is Calvin's conviction that such a continuity in fact exists, and later interpreters and critics of the Reformer have coined the term the

'*extra Calvinisticum*' to refer to Calvin's insistence that this is so.<sup>1</sup> The identification Calvin makes between the person of Jesus Christ and the person of the Eternal Son of God (with the reservation that Calvin does not limit the Eternal Word of God to the bodily existence of the Word made flesh, even during the lifetime of Jesus Christ) is complete.

It is important to be clear that the distinction Calvin makes between the Eternal Word of God and divine utterances as derived forms of the Word does not imply a distinction either between the Eternal Word of God and the Word made flesh, or between the Word made flesh during the period of its humiliation and the Word made flesh after its exaltation. In Calvin's theology the *extra Calvinisticum* serves to establish that both during the period of the humiliation of the Word made flesh (the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ) and after its exaltation, the Word made flesh is one with the Eternal Word of God. Calvin contends that the Word did not become something at the Incarnation that he was not before it, except 'flesh':

Since [the Evangelist] distinctly attributes the name of the Word to the man Christ, it follows that when he became man Christ did not cease to be what he was before and that nothing was changed in that eternal essence of God which assumed flesh. In short, the Son of God began to be man in such a way that he is still that eternal Word who had no temporal beginning.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the *assumptio carnis* meant no change in the essence of the Word of God, but only in the expression of it. The mediating function of the Incarnate Word belongs to him essentially.

#### **The Mediating Function of the Incarnate Word of God:**

According to Calvin, all knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God: but not all knowledge is saving. Important as it is to know that God is the Creator, such knowledge - although mediated by the Eternal Word of God - is nonetheless 'primal and simple'.<sup>3</sup> It is fundamental to

Calvin's whole theological enterprise that 'after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation'.<sup>4</sup>

Since we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

If, as it has been argued in Chapter 1, a primary correlation exists in Calvin's theology between the Eternal Word of God and the mediation of the knowledge of God the Creator, it may be said that there is a still stronger correlation between the Incarnate Word and the mediation of the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

Throughout Book I of the *Institutes*, Calvin indicates that he will defer his discussion of the saving knowledge of God 'until he is ready to speak of the Incarnation'. To give just one example, when Calvin summarises his argument to *Institutes* I. x. 1, he says that he has

taught that the knowledge of God, otherwise quite clearly set forth in the system of the Universe and in all creatures, is nonetheless more intimately and also more vividly revealed in his Word.

He hastens to add that he has not yet touched upon

the special covenant by which he distinguished the race of Abraham from the rest of the nations [and]... showed himself to be their Redeemer.

Instead, he is

still concerned with that knowledge that stops at the creation of the world, and does not mount up to Christ the Mediator.<sup>6</sup>

While he is discussing 'that knowledge which stops at the creation of the world', Calvin will not mention 'Christ the Mediator', in whom God shows himself to be the Redeemer.

Thus the fact that 'the eternal Word begotten before all ages from the Father... took upon himself the person and office of the Mediator, that he might join us to God' is decisive for Calvin.<sup>7</sup> This being so, he will have nothing to do with the vain speculation that 'Christ would

still have become man even if no means of redeeming mankind had been needed.'

Since all Scripture proclaims that to become our Redeemer he was clothed with flesh, it is too presumptuous to imagine another reason or end. We well know why Christ was promised from the beginning: to restore the fallen world and to succour lost men.<sup>28</sup>

It is the function of the Incarnate Word of God to mediate redemption and the knowledge of God the Redeemer. Clearly, when Calvin speaks of the Word of God as the Mediator, he makes a primary identification of the person of the Mediator with the person of the Redeemer, and therefore with the person of the Word made flesh. Any exploration of the actual content of Calvin's understanding of the Word of God as Mediator must keep this primary identification in mind. However, it should also be remembered throughout that the identification - as so often in Calvin - is primary, but not exclusive.

#### **The Incarnate Word of God and the *Tria Munera*.**

In what way, then, does the Incarnate Word of God function as the Mediator? This is the question to which Calvin turns in Book II of the *Institutes*. There, after some preliminary comments about the human condition, Calvin eventually confronts - at *Institutes* II.xii - the subject one senses he has been impatient to tackle: why 'Christ had to become man in order to fulfil the office of Mediator'.<sup>29</sup>

It is to be noted that Calvin's question is *why* the Mediator had to become a man, and not *how*. He focusses at once upon the *purpose* of the Incarnation, rather than on the *essence* of it. In doing so, Calvin is consistent with his assertion of the priority of the actuality over the possibility of the knowledge of God. He makes this point repeatedly, and polemically:

Faith should not cling to the essence of Christ, so to say, but should pay heed to His power and office. For it would be of little advantage to know who Christ is unless the second point be added of

what He wishes to be towards us and for what purpose He was sent by the Father. Hence it has come about that the Papists have nothing but an esoteric Christ, for all their care has been to apprehend His naked essence; His Kingdom, which consists in His power to save, they have neglected.<sup>10</sup>

It is in this way that Calvin introduces his exposition of the mediation of redemption and of the knowledge of God the Redeemer. 'To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at three things in him: the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood'.<sup>11</sup>

In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king, and priest. Yet it would be of little value to know these names without understanding their purpose and use. The papists use these names, too, but coldly and ineffectually, since they do not know what each of these titles contains.<sup>12</sup>

Now it is to be noted that the title 'Christ' pertains to these three offices: for we know that under the law prophets as well as priests and kings were anointed with holy oil. Hence the illustrious name of 'Messiah' was bestowed upon the promised Mediator.<sup>13</sup>

But despite the expectations raised by these passages, this three-fold exposition is not a systematic formula to which Calvin returns, either in the *Institutes* or in the *Commentaries*. As Jansen demonstrates in his study of *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, it is much more common to find Calvin expounding the work of the Mediator under two of these offices only: namely, the offices of priest and king. These two are encountered side by side, time and again, and are systematically related to one another.<sup>14</sup> But apart from the passages of the *Institutes* to which we have referred, Calvin seldom relates the Mediator's office as prophet to his office as priest and king.<sup>15</sup> He does speak frequently enough of Christ's prophetic or teaching office, but these references tend to be found in isolation when they occur.<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, in our attempt to understand the mediation of

redemption and of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, we shall look first at the offices of priest and king, and secondly - separately - at the office of prophet. It will be argued that this distinction between the Mediator as priest and king on the one hand, and the Mediator as prophet on the other, corresponds in some measure to the distinction at which we have already hinted, between the mediation of redemption itself, and the mediation of the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

**The Mediation of Redemption by the Incarnate Word of God:  
(Redemption as reconciliation: the Mediator as Priest and King).**

As Jansen has shown, when Calvin speaks of the offices of Christ - in the plural - and relates these to one another, his standard practice is to confine his attention to Christ as priest and king. It is clear that these two belong together in Calvin's theology in a way that sets them apart from Christ's office as prophet. Indeed, in the *Institutes* of 1536, only these two offices are mentioned:

As the Spirit has rested on [Christ], and has poured itself out wholly upon him, in order that we may all receive from his fulness... so do we believe in short that by this anointing he was appointed king by the Father to subject all power in heaven and on earth, that in him we might all be kings, having sway over the devil, sin, death and hell. Then we believe that he was appointed priest, by his self-sacrifice to placate the Father and reconcile him to us, that in him we might be priests, with him as our Mediator and Intercessor.<sup>17</sup>

Again, in a comment on Luke 2.25 Calvin writes that

Jesus is called *the Lord's Christ*, because He was anointed by the Father, and received the honour of Kingship and Priesthood along with the Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

Examples of this kind may be multiplied.<sup>19</sup>

In treating these two offices together, however, we do not mean to suggest that Calvin treats them with studied symmetry. On the contrary, and despite Calvin's disclaimer in the *Institutes*,<sup>20</sup> there is a clear preponderance of references to the priestly office of Christ in Calvin's

writings: it seems the Reformer preferred to express his understanding of the reconciling work of the Mediator in this way. But although Calvin draws upon the Mediator's royal office less frequently, when he does so he uses it as a parallel to the priestly office: for this reason the two may conveniently be treated together.

### **The Mediator as Priest:**

For Calvin, it is the man Jesus Christ who is the Mediator *par excellence*. When Calvin speaks of the man Jesus Christ as the Mediator, it is usually the case that he has in mind the restoration of the grace of God to helpless Adam.

The task [of the Mediator] was so to restore us to God's grace as to make of the children of men, children of God; of the heirs of Gehenna, heirs of the heavenly kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

The particular significance which Calvin attached to these two ideas - that the man Christ is the Mediator *par excellence* and that it is the restoration of the grace of God which he mediates - may be judged from his treatment of I Timothy 2.5. The verse speaks of 'one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.'<sup>22</sup> With obvious reference to the contemporary controversy with Rome, Calvin takes the opportunity provided by this verse to explain what it means to speak of Christ as Mediator. Having first argued that the phrase 'one mediator' implies that Christ is the one and only Mediator between man and God, just as the phrase 'one God' earlier in the verse implies that God is the one and only, Calvin then gives some content to his understanding of the Mediator's priestly office: 'our one Mediator bids all to come to Him, since by His death he has reconciled all to the Father.'<sup>23</sup> The mediation of the grace of God is defined here in terms of the redemption of all through the reconciling expiatory death of Christ. This is the substance of Calvin's exposition of the priestly office of Christ in the

*Institutes:*

Now we must speak briefly concerning the purpose and use of Christ's priestly office: as a pure and stainless Mediator he is by his holiness to reconcile us to God.<sup>24</sup>

But the mediation of redemption - understood as reconciliation - by the Word of God continues, according to Calvin, beyond the death of the Word made flesh: the ascended Christ continues to mediate the reconciliation between God and fallen Adam through intercession. This is the point of the *extra Calvinisticum*. Calvin argues this implication strongly:

The priestly office belongs to Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins... It follows that he is an everlasting intercessor.<sup>25</sup>

This association of ideas also occurs in Calvin's comments on 1 Timothy 2.5, where he accuses the 'Papists' of detracting from the glory of Christ, by confining Christ's mediation to redemption in such a way as to deny him the mediation of intercession, and by attributing this to the saints instead. The mediation of intercession no less than the mediation of redemption, says Calvin, 'belongs to Christ alone.'<sup>26</sup>

Calvin then addresses this connection explicitly:

The mention of redemption in this passage is not superfluous, for there is a necessary connexion between Christ's sacrificial death and his continual intercession (Rom. 8.34). They are the two parts of his priestly office, for when Christ is called priest (Heb. 7.17) the meaning is at once by his death he made expiation for our sins to reconcile us to God, and now, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, He appears in the presence of the Father for our sakes... It therefore follows that no part of his work of intercession can be transferred from Christ to others without stripping him of his title as Priest.<sup>27</sup>

The point may be summarised as follows: the Incarnate Word of God exercises a priestly office as the Mediator of redemption. There are two aspects to this priestly work of the Mediator: first and foremost, redemption is secured by the reconciling death of the Word made flesh;

but secondly, redemption is sustained by the intercession of the exalted Word.

### **The Mediator as King:**

At the outset of his discussion of the *tria munera*, Calvin asserts that 'Christ was called Messiah especially with respect to, and by virtue of, his kingship'.<sup>28</sup> In terms of the mediation of redemption, however, Calvin tends to subordinate the discussion of the royal office to the priestly office of Christ. The degree to which he relates the function of the Mediator as king to his function as priest is evident in Calvin's commentary on Genesis 14:

The same Person, therefore, who was constituted the only and eternal Priest, in order that he might reconcile us to God, and who, having made expiation, might intercede for us, is also a King of infinite power to secure our salvation, and to protect us by his guardian care.<sup>29</sup>

The Incarnate Word of God is the mediator of redemption no less in his office of king than in his office as priest. In the first place, the Word made flesh exercises this kingly office in securing our salvation: to this extent Jansen's comment is justified that, for Calvin 'the Cross is not only a sacrifice for sin. It is a royal victory.'<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, Calvin asserts in this passage that the exalted Word continues to exercise this office in protecting us by his guardian care. In the *Institutes* it is this second aspect which dominates Calvin's discussion. The 'blessing of Christ's kingly office for us' is that 'the devil, with all the resources of the world, can never destroy the church, founded as it is on the eternal throne of Christ'.<sup>31</sup>

To say that he sits on the right hand of the Father is equivalent to calling him the Father's deputy, who has in his possession the whole power of God's dominion. For God mediately [*mediate*], so to speak, wills to rule and protect the church in Christ's person.<sup>32</sup>

There are then two aspects to the Mediator's royal, as to his priestly,

office: first, redemption is secured by a powerful victory; and secondly, redemption is sustained by his guardian care.

### **Conclusion - the Mediator as Priest and King:**

The offices of priest and king are applied by Calvin to the person of the Mediator, the Word made flesh, as a means of defining the mediation of redemption. In a number of ways, Calvin develops his understanding of these two offices in parallel. In both cases, Calvin makes a primary identification of the Mediator with the person of the Word made flesh. But in both cases, he also emphasises that the redemptive work of the Mediator extends beyond the earthly ministry of Christ: the exalted Word continues to mediate redemption as both priest and king.<sup>323</sup> In both cases, the Word of God enters the presence of God as the Mediator, in order that others may follow. The movement of the mediation is from earth to heaven: the function of the Mediator as priest and king is to bring humanity into the presence of God. Significant differences emerge where the prophetic office of the Mediator is concerned.

### **The Mediation of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer by the Incarnate Word of God (Redemption as Revelation: the Mediator as Prophet).**

In his treatment of the offices of Christ, it is Calvin's usual practice to relate the offices of priest and king together, without reference to the office of prophet. But although Calvin usually develops the prophetic office of Christ in isolation, it is an office to which he refers often enough; in any case its isolation is not to be taken as a sign of its relative unimportance. On the contrary, it is precisely the isolation of the teaching office of Christ in Calvin's theology which indicates its special significance to him.

The prophetic office is the first to which Calvin turns in his exposition of the *tria munera* in *Institutes* II.xv. His remarks there include a brief definition of the prophetic office of Christ: 'he was anointed by the Spirit to be a herald and witness of the Father's grace'. In saying this, Calvin evidently means to imply that Christ stands in the line with the prophets of the biblical tradition. But this statement is immediately qualified: '[he was anointed] not in the common way - for he is distinguished from other teachers with a similar office' - from Isaiah, for instance, or the prophet David.

There are two ways in which the Reformer believes Christ is distinguished from these other prophets. In the first place unlike them 'he received anointing, not only for himself that he might carry out the office of teaching, but for his whole body that the power of the Spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel'. As in his offices as priest and king, in other words, so in his office as prophet, the exalted Christ continues the work he began in the period of his earthly ministry. Secondly, unlike other teachers, Christ the *sapientia Dei* 'has brought an end to all prophecies'.

The prophetic dignity in Christ leads us to know that in the sum of doctrine as he has given it to us all parts of perfect wisdom are contained.<sup>34</sup>

According to Jansen, this teaching office of Christ 'nowhere in Calvin assumes a separate messianic function.'<sup>35</sup> But surely a separate messianic function is exactly what we encounter here: not the mediation of reconciliation which is the messianic function of Christ as priest and king - but a function no less messianic for that. As Parker puts it: 'His preaching was a part of his redemptive activity - as necessary a part as his "offices" of priest and king.'<sup>36</sup> In his prophetic office, Christ is the Mediator of redemption as revelation; or to put it another way, Christ as prophet mediates the knowledge of God the Redeemer.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin makes the point more than once in his Commentaries upon the Gospels, that in his office as 'prophet' (or 'teacher' - the terms are synonymous for Calvin) Christ is the Mediator of the knowledge of God to fallen Adam. In his Commentary on Luke 19.41, - a passage to which Jansen does not refer - Calvin writes:

In this passage, to fulfil the Father's command faithfully, [Christ] needed to desire that the fruit of redemption should come to the whole body of the elect people. Hence, in that He was given to this people for their salvation, He bewailed their destruction for the sake of his office. I grant that he was God; but as often as it behoved him to fulfil the office of teacher, His Deity rested and in a sense hid itself, lest it should hinder Him as Mediator.<sup>38</sup>

Here the Mediator's work is explicitly interpreted by reference to the office of teacher. Elsewhere, the prophetic office is implicitly related to the mediation of redemption, as for example whenever Calvin speaks of Christ, the Redeemer, as '*Deus manifestatus in carne*'. It is in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, that the one Eternal Word of God is made manifest - is fully shown - for us. Calvin's vocabulary with reference to the Incarnation frequently underlines the revelation of God in the person of the Mediator: Christ is the 'exhibition' of the grace of God, the 'manifestation' of his grace, the 'bright mirror' of God's wonderful and singular grace, and so on.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps it is as a result of the exclusive identification he makes between the person of the Mediator and the person of the Word made flesh that Jansen fails to explore this further. For Calvin by contrast, the implication is that Christ, the Word of God, is the Mediator of the knowledge of God the Redeemer - even prior to the *assumptio carnis*. His writings are full of references to the effect that Christ has always been 'the bond of connection between God and man'.<sup>40</sup> It is because of the complete continuity Calvin assumes between the Eternal Word of God and the Word made flesh, that when he speaks of the mediation of the knowledge of God to fallen Adam even prior to the *assumptio carnis*, he

ascribes it not only to the Word of God, not only to the Mediator, but to Christ. To take an example: in his comments on 1 Corinthians 10.9, where Paul refers to an incident recorded in the Book of Numbers, Calvin says,

It is not at all strange that Christ is called the Leader of the Israelites; for, just as God has never shown his graciousness to his people except through him as Mediator, in the same way He has conferred no benefit except at his hand.<sup>41</sup>

Or again,

Nor was the state of the fathers under the Law any different; for though they beheld Christ obscurely under shadows, God never revealed himself without Christ.<sup>42</sup>

And again,

Nor indeed had any of the saints ever any communication with God except through the promised Mediator.<sup>43</sup>

In fact much of Institutes II.vi-xi takes up this same theme: Calvin attempts to show how Christ was present as the Mediator under the Old Covenant, albeit in type and figure and promise of the 'advent' itself. In the same manner he writes at an earlier point in the Institutes, of Abraham's encounter with an angel, that

the orthodox doctors of the Church have rightly and prudently interpreted that chief angel to be God's Word, who already at that time, as a sort of foretaste, had begun to fulfil the office of Mediator. For even though he was not yet clothed with flesh, he came down, so to speak, as an intermediary, in order to approach believers more intimately... Hence, also, that saying of Paul's that Christ was the leader of the people in the Wilderness [I Cor. 10.4] because even though the time of humbling had not yet arrived, that eternal Word nevertheless set forth a figure of the office to which he had been destined.<sup>44</sup>

In short,

apart from the Mediator, God never showed favour toward the ancient people, nor ever gave hope of grace to them.<sup>45</sup>

#### **Conclusion - the Mediator as Prophet:**

Jansen badly underestimates the importance of the prophetic office of the Mediator to the Reformer. In fact, the mediation to fallen Adam

of the knowledge of God the Redeemer by the Word of God is at the heart of Calvin's theology. It is the central pillar of his *Institutes*, and a constant refrain in his Commentaries, Sermons and Tracts.

The mediation of redemption by the Incarnate Word of God is not confined to his offices as priest and king, by which humanity is reconciled to God. This mediation, it has been noted, is a mediation through which humanity is brought into the presence of God, and in which the movement is from earth to heaven. In his office as prophet, the Mediator fulfils a separate messianic function, by which God is revealed to humanity. This mediation is a mediation through which the presence of God is found among human beings and in which the movement is from heaven to earth.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, far from being 'peripheral' to Calvin's theology, the prophetic office is in fact integral to it. For the implication of the *extra Calvinisticum* is to emphasise the continuity of the Word made flesh with the eternal Word of God, of the Mediator as priest and king with the Mediator as prophet, of redemption as reconciliation with redemption as revelation, and of the mediation of redemption itself with the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

#### **The Christological Sources for the Knowledge of God the Redeemer:**

As there was occasion to observe in Chapter 1, when in the 1559 *Institutes* Calvin first distinguishes between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, he also draws attention to the respective sources of this two-fold knowledge of God:

First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ he shows himself the Redeemer.<sup>47</sup>

There is, for Calvin, only one source for the knowledge of God the

Redeemer: that is, the face of Christ.

But as the foregoing discussion has suggested, this is not to say that there was no knowledge of God the Redeemer before the advent of the Incarnate Word. It is on the grounds of the *extra Calvinisticum* that Calvin contends that even before the *assumptio carnis*, the Lord 'showed himself the Redeemer in the face of Christ'.

There is no doubt that Adam, Noah, Abraham and the rest of the patriarchs... penetrated to the intimate knowledge of [God] that in a way distinguished them from unbelievers... For, that they might pass from death to life, it was necessary to recognise God not only as Creator but also as Redeemer, for undoubtedly they arrived at both from the Word.<sup>48</sup>

Even before the *assumptio carnis*, the patriarchs found their knowledge of the Redeemer in the Word; that is, in 'the face of Christ'.

In the lifetime of the man Jesus Christ (during the period of the humiliation of the Word, as Calvin is fond of calling it) God showed himself to be the Redeemer in his ministry, and above all in his death and resurrection. This is the substance of *Institutes* II.xvi in particular, where Calvin enquires 'How Christ has fulfilled the function of Redeemer to acquire salvation for us', and adds that 'here also his death and resurrection are discussed, as well as his ascent into heaven.'<sup>49</sup>

Even after the exaltation of the Incarnate Word, it is in the face of Christ that the Lord shows himself the Redeemer. Calvin is alert to the objection that, subsequent to his ascent into heaven, it is no longer possible to 'see' Christ's face. True, he concedes,

Christ is not walking on the earth, we may not cradle him in our arms, but in the Gospel His divine majesty shines bright and far, and there shows us his features, as Paul says (2 Cor. 3.18) as it were, face to face.<sup>50</sup>

There is more to be said in Chapter 3 about what Calvin means by saying that Christ continues to meet us 'face to face', 'in the Gospel': for the present it is sufficient to note that as far as Calvin is concerned,

the exaltation of the Word Incarnate does not mean that the face of Christ is now hidden from us, or that we need to find a more accessible source for the knowledge of God the Redeemer. On the contrary, 'Today we behold Christ in the Gospel no less than if he stood with us.'<sup>51</sup> Today, no less than in the days of the earthly ministry of the Incarnate Word, the Lord shows himself the Redeemer 'in the face of Christ'. Today as always, according to Calvin, the source of our knowledge of God is Christological.

#### **The Trinitarian Content of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer:**

What, then, of the content of the knowledge of God the Redeemer? What is it that is made known in Christ that cannot be derived from the humble contemplation of the creation, or the 'general' teaching of Scripture (i.e.: those parts of Scripture which do not pertain to our redemption)? In this connection it is instructive to note what it is that Calvin tells us is 'manifest' or 'exhibited' in Christ.

The answer is the grace of God, or, as Dowey speaks of it, his 'gratuitous mercy'.<sup>52</sup> If it is in the gospel that we see Christ, this is because the gospel directs us to the grace manifest in him:

the word "gospel", taken in the broad sense, includes those testimonies of his mercy and fatherly favour which God gave to the patriarchs of old. In a higher sense, however, the word refers, I say, to the proclamation of the grace manifested in Christ.<sup>53</sup>

It is, according to the Reformer, 'the treasures of God's grace' which 'are exhibited to the world in Christ'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Calvin speaks of 'the inestimable abundance of grace laid open for us in Christ'.<sup>55</sup>

If, then, the content of the knowledge of God the Redeemer is 'grace', in what sense may the content of this knowledge be said to be 'trinitarian'?

In the first place it is important to note that Calvin's reference

to 'grace' is a reference to the gracious activity of God the Redeemer, not simply to his gracious essence. Parker expresses this well:

This *exhibitio gratiae Dei* must not be construed to mean a simple showing forth of God's goodwill to men. The substance and the manner of the exhibition are one, in that it is a redemptive exhibition, an exhibition of the *grace* of God: and that means, of the forgiveness of God in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Given that the interpolation of the Word of God between the nature of God and the knowledge of God introduces an essentially trinitarian dynamic to the logic behind Calvin's theology, it will be no surprise to find that the knowledge of God's redeeming grace, like the knowledge of God's creative work, is a knowledge of God as Trinity. In his redemptive activity as in his creative activity the three persons of the one God are known. In Calvin's words, 'in the person of the Mediator the glory of the whole divinity surely shines'.<sup>57</sup>

Attention has already been drawn to the way Calvin distinguishes between the persons of the Trinity in terms of their relation to the activity of God:

To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of the redemptive activity of God, then, it may be said that God manifests himself as Trinity: to the Father is attributed the origin of redemption; to the Son the ordered disposition (or mediation) of it; and to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.

A number of passages in the *Institutes* and the *Commentaries* make interesting reading in this light, when Calvin assesses the causes of our redemption. 'The philosophers', he reminds his readers, 'postulate four kinds of causes to be observed in the outworking of things'.

Scripture everywhere proclaims that the efficient cause of our obtaining eternal life is the mercy of the heavenly Father and his freely given love toward us. Surely the material cause is Christ, with his obedience, through which he acquired righteousness for us.

What shall we say is the formal or instrumental cause, but faith? And John includes these three in one sentence when he says: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life'. As for the final cause, ...it consists in the proof of divine justice and in the praise of God's goodness.<sup>69</sup>

It is to be noted that Calvin relates each of the first three 'causes' to the persons of the Trinity, and that he acknowledges that the fourth cause stands somewhat apart. This same pattern of exposition is repeated elsewhere.<sup>60</sup>

As the Mediator of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer, Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God. He is the image of this Triune God: the self-revelation of God the Trinity. It was noted in Chapter 1 that Calvin is inclined to say that in his creative activity, a trinity of the *virtutes* of God are manifest: his goodness, his wisdom and his power. It is striking that Calvin finds himself constrained by his understanding of Christ as the image - or manifestation - of (the Triune) God to make the same point time and again in this context:

[Christ] is said to be the express image of God because in Him God has entirely revealed Himself, inasmuch as his infinite goodness, wisdom and power appear in him substantially.<sup>61</sup>

To confirm what he has declared about Christ, he now adds that it was so settled by the providence of God... 'This', he says, 'was done by the counsel of God, that all fulness may dwell in him.' Now he means a fulness of righteousness, wisdom and power and every blessing. For whatever God has he has conferred upon His Son.<sup>62</sup>

[Christ] says that their eyes are blessed because they perceive the glory worthy of the only begotten Son of God and acknowledge that he is their Redeemer, because the lively image of God shines upon them and in it they perceive their salvation and full blessedness... We see Christ without seeing and hear Him without hearing. In the Gospel, as Paul says (2 Cor. 3.18) He appears to us face to face, so that we are transformed into His image, and the perfection of wisdom, righteousness and life which was once revealed in Him shines constantly in the gospel.<sup>63</sup>

#### Conclusion:

The Word of God functions as the Mediator with regard to the

knowledge of God the Redeemer, in that the redemption of fallen Adam is itself mediated by the Word. The work of the mediation of redemption is associated particularly with the Word made flesh, and it is above all in the reconciling death of Christ that Calvin locates the restoration of God's grace to fallen Adam. This reconciliation between God and fallen Adam is not only mediated, but is also sustained by the Word of God: this he accomplishes in his offices as priest and king. But these two offices do not exhaust the mediating work of the Redeemer. In his office as prophet, Christ is also the Mediator of the knowledge of God to fallen Adam. Fallen Adam also encounters the Redeemer in the revelation mediated by the Word of God: this is so before the *assumptio carnis*, as well as after. There is thus a double movement in the mediation of redemption by the Word of God: a redemptive movement from earth to heaven by which humanity is brought into the very presence of God, by the reconciling Word, and a redemptive movement from heaven to earth, by which the very presence of God made known to humanity by the revelatory Word.

It is the *extra Calvinisticum* which binds together the offices of Christ as priest and king, on the one hand, with his office as prophet on the other, and the mediation of redemption to the mediation of the knowledge of God the Redeemer. It also serves to guarantee the Christological sources of our knowledge of God the Redeemer and the Trinitarian content of it. For the *extra Calvinisticum* asserts the complete continuity between the Word made flesh and the Eternal Word of God; a continuity which, it has become evident, is assumed throughout Calvin's discussion of the mediation of revelation by the Word of God. The same continuity implies that Christ, the Word made flesh, shares the same two-fold relation that belongs to the Eternal Word of God: to God and to men.<sup>64</sup> In so far as the Word made flesh has a relation to men,

he is consistently the source of the knowledge of God the Redeemer; in so far as he has a relation to God, the Word made flesh is consistently the manifestation of the Godhead, of one God in three persons.

NOTES:

- 1 There is a helpful introduction to this feature of Calvin's theology in Willis: *Christology*.
- 2 Comm. John 1. 14, pp. 20-21.
- 3 Inst. I. ii. 1, p. 40.
- 4 Inst. II. vi. 1, p. 341.
- 5 Inst. II. vi. 1, p. 341.
- 6 Eg: Inst. I. x. 1, p. 97; see also: I. ii. 1, p. 40; I. vi. 1, p. 71; I. xiii. 9, p. 131.
- 7 Inst. I. xiii. 24, p. 151.
- 8 Inst. II. xii. 4, p. 467.
- 9 Inst. II. xii. T, p. 464.
- 10 Comm. John 1. 49, p. 43; see also Comm. John 14. 10, p. 78.
- 11 Inst. II. xv. T, p. 494.
- 12 Inst. II. xv. 1, p. 494
- 13 Inst. II. xv. 2, p. 495.
- 14 Jansen: *Work of Christ*. pp. 39-51. Eg. Comm. Jer. 33. 17f, Vol. 4, p. 257; Comm. Luke 2. 25, p. 91; Comm. Matt. 16. 16, p. 185; Comm. Acts 10. 38, p. 311f; Comm. Gen. 14. 18, p. 389; Comm. Ps. 122. 4, Vol. 5, p. 74.
- 15 He does so in the Genevan Catechism [p. 95 in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid (S.C.M. Press, London/ Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1954)], and in a Sermon on Luke 1. 1-4 (CO. 46. 6) cited by Jansen: *Work of Christ*, p. 61. Jansen observes that as far as he can discover, 'the formula of the three offices never appears in his commentaries'. p. 60-61.
- 16 eg. Comm. John 8. 26, p. 217; Comm. Matt. 12. 42, p. 59; Comm. Tit. 1. 1, p. 351.
- 17 *The Institutes of Christian Religion of 1536*, ed. and trans. F. L. Battles (rev. ed. Collins, London 1986) p. 54. (Hereafter cited as 1536 Inst. p. 54.)

18 Comm. Lk. 2.25, p.91.

19 See note 14 above.

20 In *Institutes* II.xv.2, p.496, Calvin recognises 'that Christ was called Messiah especially with respect to, and by virtue of, his kingship'. But this priority is not reflected in the way Calvin expounds of the mediation of redemption.

21 Comm. 1 Tim. 2.5, pp.209-212.

22 This was presumably a passage of some significance for Calvin, as he both quotes it at a decisive stage of his argument in the *Institutes* (II.xii.1, p.465) and devotes considerable attention to it in his *Commentary* (1 Tim 2.5, pp.209-212).

23 Comm. 1 Tim. 2.5, p.211.

24 Inst. II.xv.6, p.501; see also Inst. III.xx.20, p.877.

25 Inst. II.xv.6, p.502.

26 Comm. 1 Tim 2.5, p.211.

27 Comm. 1 Tim 2.5, p.212.

28 Inst. II.xv.2, p.496.

29 Comm. Gen. 14.18, p.389.

30 Jansen: *Work of Christ*, p.88; see also Comm. Matt. 12.29, pp.43,44; Comm. Acts 16.22, p.81; Inst. II.xv.5, p.500.

31 Inst. II.xv.3, p.498.

32 Inst. II.xv.5, p.500.

33 We may put this another way: viewed from the perspective of the *assumptio carnis*, the emphasis in the priestly and kingly offices of the Mediator is upon their present and future aspects: that is, a mediation characteristic of Christ's earthly ministry is exercised also by the exalted Christ. We shall find that continuity of a rather different kind is emphasised by Calvin when he speaks of the Mediator in terms of the prophetic office. Viewed from the perspective of the *assumptio carnis* the emphasis in the prophetic office of the Mediator, is placed by Calvin upon the past and present aspects: that is, a mediation characteristic of the Eternal Word culminates in the mediation of the Incarnate Christ. See below, pp.52-56.

34 Inst. II.xv.2, p.496.

35 Jansen: *Work of Christ*, p.99.

36 Parker: *Doctrine*, p.111.

37 Does Calvin have something like this revelation/reconciliation distinction in mind when he speaks of Christ as 'the witness and minister of God's salvation'? See Comm. Luke 19.41, p.295.

- 38 Comm. Luke 19. 41, p. 295.
- 39 Eg.: Inst. II. ix. 2, p. 428; II. xiv. 7, p. 491; et al.
- 40 Comm. Gen. 48. 16, p. 429.
- 41 Comm. 1 Cor. 10. 8, p. 209.
- 42 Comm. John 5. 23, p. 128.
- 43 Comm. Ex. 3. 2, Vol. 1, p. 61.
- 44 Inst. I. xiii. 10, p. 133.
- 45 Inst. II. vi. 2, p. 342.
- 46 There is a tremendously important connection here of the office of prophet and revelation, with accommodation. This is developed in Chapter 5.
- 47 Inst. 1. ii. 1, p. 40.
- 48 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 70.
- 49 Inst. II. xv. T, p. 494.
- 50 Comm. Lk. 2. 30, p. 92.
- 51 Comm. John 20. 29, Vol. 2, p. 212. See also Comm. Mt. 13. 16, Vol. 2, pp. 68-69.
- 52 Dowey: Knowledge, p. 206.
- 53 Inst. II. ix. 2, p. 425.
- 54 Comm. Mt. 11. 4, p. 3.
- 55 Inst. II. ix. 4, p. 427; see also the 'manifestation of God's promises', Inst. II. x. 4, p. 432.
- 56 Parker: *Doctrine*, p. 112.
- 57 Inst. I. xv. 3, p. 187; cf.: Parker's remark that 'Calvin cannot, therefore, interpret the life and acts of Jesus as anything other than the activity of God', in his: *Doctrine*, p. 114.
- 58 Inst. I. xiii. 18, pp. 142-143.
- 59 Inst. III. xiv. 17, p. 784.
- 60 Inst. III. xiv. 21, p. 787; Comm. Rom. 3. 24, p. 75; Comm. Eph. 1. 5ff., pp. 126-128.
- 61 Comm. John 14. 10 p. 78.
- 62 Comm. Col. 1. 19, p. 311.
- 63 Comm. Mt. 13. 16, Vol. 2, p. 69.

- CHAPTER 3 -

THE MEDIATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES

**Introduction:**

Calvin's theology proceeds from the premise that the initiative for all knowledge of God rests with God himself, and that God has taken that initiative in his Word. All knowledge of God is mediated by the Word of God; the nature of God is known only when the Word of God mediates the knowledge of God.

Attention has already been drawn in chapters 1 and 2 to the importance of the distinction Calvin makes in *Institutes* I.xii.7 between - on the one hand - 'the eternal and essential Word of the Father' who 'abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself', and - on the other hand - 'all divinely uttered revelations'. It has been noted that while Calvin insists that such revelations are 'correctly designated by the term "word of God"', he implies that they are so designated by virtue of their derivation from the Essential or Substantial Word.

Further light can be shed on this distinction by a detailed consideration of the terminology Calvin employs to refer to the various expressions of the Word of God. In the *Institutes* of 1559, and indeed elsewhere in his writings, Calvin tends to use two terms: '*Sermo Dei*' and '*Verbum Dei*'. As Parker has noted, there is evidence (particularly in the *Commentary on John*) to suggest that the Reformer did not use these terms carelessly or synonymously. Commenting on the Greek text of John 1.1, Calvin - following Erasmus - translates '*Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος*' as '*In principio erat Sermo*', and comments:

I am surprised that the Latin versions put *verbum* for *ὁ Λόγος*, for that is rather the translation of *τὸ ρῆμα*. But even if we allow that it is a possibility, it cannot be denied that *sermo* is far more appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

Weighing the possibility that this passage might be 'the basis for a

distinction universal in Calvin's writings and upon which a consistent doctrine can be built', Parker concludes that:

In fact, we have nothing of the sort, for he uses the the two words quite indiscriminately, even to the extent of using *Verbum* when he quotes John 1! The most that can be said is that he always seems to couple together *aeternus* and *Sermo*, and not *aeternum* and *Verbum*, and that in general he uses *Sermo* rather than *Verbum* as the synonym of *sapientia Dei*, though there are exceptions. Nevertheless, inconsistently as he may employ the terms, there remains in the distinction the essence of the doctrine of the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

Parker can hardly be said to have overstated his case: in fact there is more to the distinction implied in Calvin's words than this cautious assessment allows. It may be said quite forthrightly that Calvin uses the term '*Sermo Dei*' primarily to refer to the Eternal Word of God, or to Christ as the Incarnate expression of the Eternal Word; and that he uses the term '*Verbum Dei*' primarily to refer to the Word of God in the Scriptures. Although it is true that Calvin does not make this distinction between these terms with anything like absolute consistency, it does not follow that he employs them as indiscriminately as Parker suggests.

In the *Institutes* of 1559, for instance, Calvin uses the term '*Sermo*' to refer to 'the Word of God' on 74 occasions. In at least 49 (i.e.: two-thirds) of these cases the reference is clearly to the Eternal Word; by contrast the term is used in a clear and direct reference to the Word of God in the Scriptures only six times.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in Book I of the *Institutes* alone Calvin uses the term '*Verbum*' with reference to the Word of God in the Scriptures no fewer than 45 times (out of a total of 78), but with reference to the Eternal Word only 16 times.<sup>4</sup> Such a distribution cannot be said to be 'indiscriminate': the primary referent of each term is clear. Moreover, not only does Calvin speak of 'the Eternal Word' as '*aeternus Sermo*' not '*aeternum Verbum*' with absolute consistency, as Parker notes; he is equally consistent in speaking of the Sacred Word' (i.e.: Scripture) as '*Sacrum Verbum*' rather than '*Sacer Sermo*'.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that Calvin sometimes uses the terms '*Sermo Dei*' and '*Verbum Dei*' interchangeably is not necessarily to be explained as a mark of his inconsistency. The progression Calvin makes in *Institutes* I.xiii.7 suggests that this feature of his writings is not indiscriminate, but rather reflects the nature of the relationship Calvin assumes between the *aeternus Sermo* and the *Sacram Verbum*.

The inclusion of the text of *Institutes* I.xiii.7 in the Appendix is intended to show why it is that, as far as Calvin is concerned, while the terms *verbum Dei* and *Sermo Dei* have - strictly speaking - different primary referents, nevertheless, they may be used to some extent interchangeably. Calvin's argument is that the *verbum Dei* which 'is set before us in Scripture' is not 'a merely fleeting and vanishing utterance', i.e.: not an expression of the *vox Dei* only. It is in fact an expression of the *Sermo Dei*, the 'everlasting Wisdom, residing with God'. The *verbum* is to be 'understood as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential *Sermo* of the Father'. Calvin's language here - as well as in the Commentary on John - suggests that he has a real and carefully defined distinction in mind. However - and it ought not to be assumed that this step is made carelessly by Calvin - the relationship of the *Sermo Dei* to the *Verbum Dei* is so close that the terms may be used interchangeably: as 'the wellspring' of all '*verbi Dei*', the *aeternus Sermo Dei* may be said to be 'the substantial *Verbum Dei*'. And as the expression of the everlasting Wisdom of God, the *sacram Verbum Dei* which is set forth in the Scriptures may be called the *Sermo Dei*. The fact that Calvin uses these terms interchangeably, in other words, is not indiscriminate: it does not mean that the basic distinction he makes between the *Sermo Dei* and the *Verbum Dei* has broken down at this point. On the contrary, it means that Calvin's understanding of 'the Word of God' is developed in a deliberate way.<sup>65</sup>

It is on this basis that the present chapter describes the function of

the Scriptures in Calvin's theology in terms of mediation. It is, in the first instance, the function of the *aeternus Sermo Dei* to mediate the knowledge of God; but as an expression of the *aeternus Sermo Dei*, this function also falls to the *Sacrum Verbum Dei*.

In Chapters 1 and 2 the attempt has been made to elucidate Calvin's understanding of the actuality of the knowledge of God in the *aeternus Sermo Dei*.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that the distinction between the knowledge of God the Creator and the Knowledge of God the Redeemer is a crucial one for Calvin, and that these two aspects of the knowledge of God are mediated respectively by the Eternal Word of God, and the Word made flesh. It has also been argued that the emphasis Calvin places on the continuity between these two forms of the *aeternus Sermo Dei*, a feature of his theology which is usually described as the '*extra Calvinisticum*', ensures that these two aspects of the knowledge of God are bound together.

The distinction Calvin makes between these two forms of the *aeternus Sermo Dei* on the one hand, and the *Sacrum Verbum Dei* on the other, has implications for the actuality of the knowledge of God in the Scriptures. If no such distinction were made, it would follow that Scripture has its mediating function essentially. The Scriptures would then be expected to supplement the actual two-fold character of the knowledge of God. Given that the distinction is made, it follows that Scripture has its mediating function derivatively, and that it therefore inherits the character of the knowledge of God which it mediates. There is no third aspect of the knowledge of God identified particularly with the Scriptures, in the way that Calvin identifies the knowledge of God the Creator with the Eternal Word of God, and the knowledge of God the Redeemer with the Incarnate Word of God. To speak of the mediation of the knowledge of God in Scripture in addition to its mediation in the Eternal Word of God and the Incarnate Word does not imply a *triplex cognitio Dei*.

Nevertheless, it emerges that Scripture does have its own mediating function, according to Calvin: it is to mediate this two-fold knowledge of God as doctrine.

### **The Mediating Function of the Scriptures:**

Calvin does not explicitly apply the language of mediation to the Scriptures, in the way that he applies it both to the Eternal Word and to the Word made flesh. It is therefore to some extent an artificial construction to express in these terms the particular function that the Scriptures have in his theology. Nevertheless, the attempt is justified on the basis of the Reformer's tendency to speak even of the Scriptures as the (mediating) *Sermo Dei*.<sup>10</sup>

It may be further justified on the grounds that, more than most theologians, Calvin tends to personify Scripture. Again and again he makes the Scriptures the subject of his sentences: Scripture, he says, 'shows us things',<sup>11</sup> 'makes things known to us',<sup>12</sup> and 'sets things forth'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, although Calvin never uses the precise expression 'Scripture mediates revelation', he says the same thing countless times in other words. Furthermore, it is the most common of these remarkably varied expressions which indicates the form of the revelation mediated by Scripture. According to Calvin, Scripture 'speaks', 'proclaims', 'asserts', 'warns' and 'affirms', it 'defines' things, 'says' things and 'relates' them; but much, much more commonly than anything else Calvin writes that 'Scripture teaches' (*docet*).<sup>14</sup>

For Calvin, Scripture mediates revelation as doctrine. It is with the teaching (*doctrina*) of Scripture that Calvin is chiefly concerned, his contention being that 'God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction'.

Suppose we ponder how slippery is the fall of the human mind into forgetfulness of God, how great the tendency to every kind of error,

how great the lust to fashion constantly new and artificial religions. Then we may perceive how necessary was such written proof of the heavenly doctrine, that it should neither perish through forgetfulness nor vanish through error nor be corrupted by the audacity of men.<sup>13</sup>

This interest in the *doctrina Scripturae* is such that Calvin speaks of the ministry of the Word as the administration of doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Mediation of Doctrine:**

The noun '*doctrina*' occurs frequently in the *Institutes*.<sup>15</sup> Calvin coins an impressive array of terms with which to describe the teaching of Scripture. It emerges from a study of these terms that whereas all of the teaching of Scripture may be said to be *sacra doctrina*<sup>16</sup> and *caelesti doctrina*,<sup>17</sup> nevertheless not all doctrine is of one kind.

Attention has already been drawn to the passage in *Institutes* I.ii.1, where Calvin distinguishes between the knowledge of God as Creator, and the knowledge of God as Redeemer. It is to be observed that there is a distinction to be made within the *doctrina Scripturae* which relates to this two-fold knowledge of God. 'The Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator', Calvin says, 'as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the *generalis Scripturae doctrina*'.<sup>18</sup> The Reformer describes as the 'general teaching' of Scripture that which sets forth God as the Creator: it is to be contrasted with 'the specific doctrine of faith and repentance that sets forth Christ as Mediator'.<sup>19</sup> This 'specific doctrine', which Calvin also refers to as the *doctrina fidei*<sup>20</sup> or the *salutis doctrina*,<sup>21</sup> is the means by which the Lord is revealed as Redeemer.

Although it is not immediately obvious that this is so, it is in fact this same distinction that Calvin makes by contrasting the doctrine of the Law<sup>22</sup> with the doctrine of the Gospel.<sup>23</sup>

This point is not immediately obvious because of the ambiguous role of the Law in Calvin's thought. Is the Law to be bracketed with the Gospel,

or set over against it? Is the Law a revelation of 'the orderly will of the Creator' or of 'the gratuitous mercy of the Redeemer'.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Calvin locates his exposition of it in Book II of the *Institutes* suggests that he considers the Law to be part of the revelation of God the Redeemer; there is certainly no simple opposition of Law and Gospel in his theology. Yet when Calvin refers specifically to the doctrine of the Law (the *doctrina Legis*) he does in fact identify it with the *doctrina generalis* by which we know that God is our Creator, and contrast it with 'the doctrine of faith' and 'the doctrine of the Gospel' (the *doctrina Evangelii*) by which we know that God is our Redeemer. The explanation of this ambiguity is that there is more to the Law than the *doctrina Legis*; the doctrine of the Gospel is also to be found in it.

Despite the fact that he has placed his exposition of the Law in Book II of the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin evidently perceives a correspondence between the teaching of the Law and the content of *Institutes* Book I. He makes the point in introducing his exposition of the Decalogue with a summary of *Institutes* I and II. i-vi:

Now in summarising what is required for the true knowledge of God, we have taught that we cannot conceive him in his greatness without being confronted by his majesty, and so compelled to worship him. In our discussion of the knowledge of ourselves we have set forth this chief point: that empty of all opinion of our own virtue and shorn of all assurance of our own righteousness - in fact broken and crushed by awareness of our utter poverty - we may learn genuine humility and self-abasement. Both of these the Lord accomplishes in his Law.

Two significant statements follow. First, Calvin contends that

That inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.

But secondly, he adds because 'man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God',

The Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law.<sup>25</sup>

The *doctrina Legis* may be said to correspond to 'the general teaching of Scripture' in that it confirms and clarifies what is engraved upon the human conscience. This teaching is a summary not only those things which everyone still knows 'by nature', but also those things which human beings would have known by virtue of their creation had they continued in their state of created righteousness.

Similarly, the purpose of the *doctrina Legis* coincides with the purpose of the self-revelation of God in creation. In the creation, Calvin writes,

God's powers are represented as in a painting. Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him, and from this to true and complete happiness.<sup>26</sup>

The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity.<sup>27</sup>

This corresponds with Calvin's understanding of the purpose of the Law:

Now it will not be difficult to decide the purpose of the whole law: the fulfilment of righteousness to form human life to the archetype of purity. For God has so depicted his character in the law that if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God, as it were, in his own life... Here is the object of the teaching of the law (*Legis doctrina*): to join man by holiness of life to his God, and, as Moses says elsewhere, to make him cleave to God.<sup>28</sup>

God is 'depicted' in the Law as in the creation, providing a revelation of his will and of his creative purpose, and inviting humankind to a union with himself.

The general teaching of Scripture, however, which corresponds to the teaching of the Law, and to the testimony of the created order, is a revelation of God as Creator only. It makes no mention of repentance, faith and the redemptive purpose of God.

These specific teachings of Scripture belong to the *doctrina Evangelii*, which supplements rather than clarifies the content of the natural law. The fundamental difference is that salvation follows only

where the teaching of the Gospel is known.

Since we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth God our Father in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

After the fall of the first man, no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation.<sup>30</sup>

If, then, it is exclusively in the teaching of the Gospel that God makes himself known as the Redeemer, the question arises as to what the teaching of the Gospel contains that the general teaching of Scripture does not. Calvin's answer is that whereas in the fashioning of the Universe God displays 'his hands and feet', in Christ he presents to our view his heart. The teaching of the Gospel reveals 'the secret love of God, with which he embraces us in Christ'.<sup>31</sup> The doctrine of the Gospel is the grace of God manifest in Christ.

Although Calvin contrasts the *doctrina Legis* with the *doctrina Evangelii*, he does not set the Law over against the Gospel. For the doctrine of the Gospel (the grace of God manifest in Christ) is also to be found in the Law. This is evident from the title Calvin gives to *Institutes* Book II: 'The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ' was 'First Disclosed to the Father under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel.'<sup>32</sup> This is explained more fully as follows:

Now I take the gospel to be the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ. I recognize, of course, that since Paul calls the gospel "the doctrine of faith" [1 Tim. 4.6], all those promises of free remission of sins which commonly occur in the law, whereby God reconciles men to himself, are counted as parts of it... From this it follows that the word "gospel", taken in the broad sense, includes those testimonies of his mercy and fatherly favour which God gave to the patriarchs of old. In a higher sense, however, the word refers to the proclamation of the grace manifested in Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin considers it important to make the point that 'all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us.'<sup>34</sup> This explains the fact that Calvin's exposition of

the Decalogue is located in Book II of the *Institutes*: according to Calvin the *doctrina Evangelii* is to be found in the Law, as well as in the Gospel.

Scripture, then, functions in Calvin's theology as the mediator of doctrine, and the doctrine it mediates is of two kinds. In the general teaching of Scripture, which corresponds to the *doctrina Legis*, God shows himself to be the Creator; in the specific doctrine of faith, which corresponds to the *doctrina Evangelii*, God reveals himself as the Redeemer in Christ. The doctrine of the Gospel, however, is comprehensive, for the general teaching of Scripture is given only to those who have faith. The spectacles of Scripture (by which the Creator is understood and his works reverently appreciated) are given only to the redeemed.

There is a further point to be made about the mediating function of Scripture in Calvin's theology: Scripture not only delivers this doctrine, but also serves to regulate it. Once again the parallels with the mediation of the knowledge of God in the Eternal Word and in the Incarnate Word are important. Just as the Eternal Word is the Mediator of order in Creation, first fashioning and then sustaining it, and the Incarnate Word is the Mediator of order in redemption, first achieving and then sustaining it, so the Scriptures mediate order in doctrine, first delivering and then regulating it.

There is no escaping the strand of Calvin's thought which asserts that God's self-revelation has taken the form of words: words that correspond with the truth about God, and which are to be accepted and obeyed as a consequence. At times Calvin's view of the doctrine of Scripture is plainly didactic: he describes Scripture as a 'school'.<sup>36</sup> In this school, doctrine may be said to be the syllabus. Revelation, here, is undoubtedly conceived of in terms of information: the knowledge of God consists in an intellectual assent to the propositional content of the doctrine of Scripture.

Let us remember here as in all religious doctrine, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety; not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters, anything except what has been imparted to us in God's Word.<sup>36</sup>

The Scriptures, then, mediate the rule as well as the revelation of God. According to the Reformer, Scripture itself is the sceptre by which God exercises his kingly rule;<sup>37</sup> and it is through the doctrine of Scripture that God asserts his lawful sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, God's people are to conform to the rule established by Scripture:

We should seek in the Scriptures a sure rule both of thinking and of speaking; by which we may regulate all the thoughts of our minds, and all the words of our mouths.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin undoubtedly argues that Scripture is the mediator of doctrine, and that the doctrine of Scripture is to be accepted and obeyed simply because it is revealed by God. In Calvin's view, the nature of God is such that the knowledge of God may be conveyed in teaching: in the words and propositions of Scripture. But Calvin is far from suggesting that the mediating function of Scripture may be reduced to the mediation of information about God. In the final analysis Calvin's contention is that Scripture mediates the knowledge of God, not in the sense of information about God, but in the sense of an experience of God. According to the Reformer, the doctrine of Scripture is to be accepted and obeyed not only because it is revealed by God, but because as it is accepted and obeyed it mediates the revelation of God.

#### **The Mediation of the Two-fold Knowledge of God:**

The point has been made often enough that in Calvin's theology the revelation mediated by the Scriptures is a 'revelation in the sense not of "information" about God, but of the impartation of God Himself',<sup>40</sup> that the Scriptures are in some sense 'the giving of God Himself as distinguished from merely a deposit about God'<sup>41</sup> and that 'Scripture, as the revealed

Word of God, could be not only normative, but, in analogy to Christ the revealed Word, instrumental'.<sup>42</sup>

Once again the Word of God in the Scriptures exercises its mediating function in a manner parallel to that exercised by the Eternal Word of God and the Incarnate Word. It has been suggested that the Eternal Word of God functions in Calvin's theology not only as the Mediator of creation, but as the Mediator of the knowledge of God the Creator, and that the Incarnate Word of God functions not only as the Mediator of redemption, but as the Mediator of the knowledge of God the Redeemer. In the case of the Word of God in the Scriptures, the Word mediates not only doctrine, but also the two-fold knowledge of God. Indeed, learning the bare letter of Scripture is useless unless this further object is kept in mind. Calvin warns that

You will fruitlessly inculcate all those duties contained [in the Law] unless your doctrine has fear and reverence towards the Lord as its foundation.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout his writings, Calvin is consistently concerned to press home the importance of the use which is made of the doctrine of Scripture in the context of the individual's relationship with God,<sup>44</sup> so that the question implied by the title Calvin gives to *Institutes* I.xvii ('*in quem scopum referenda sit haec doctrina*' - to what end should this doctrine be applied?) is perfectly characteristic of him.<sup>45</sup>

It is certainly not doctrine in and for itself that Scripture is intended to convey in Calvin's view. Calvin expects the doctrine of Scripture - whether it is the *doctrina Legis* or the *doctrina Evangelii* - to be effective. In order to draw out the consistent parallels between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer which exist in Calvin's thought at this point, it will be helpful to consider the manifestation of the Creator in the general teaching of Scripture separately from the manifestation of the Redeemer in the doctrine of the gospel. It should, of course, be emphasised that the separation is not a

separation of the God the Creator from God the Redeemer, but of that doctrine in which the one God is manifest as Creator from that in which the same God is manifest as Redeemer.

**God the Creator manifests himself in the general teaching of Scripture.**

It is clear from his exposition of it in *Institutes* Book I, that Calvin expects the general teaching of Scripture about the creative activity of God to be effective. The teaching given in Scripture about the Creator is not given in and for itself, and the people of God have never been bound to 'outward doctrine as if they were learning their ABC's'.<sup>46</sup> The significance of the title Calvin gives to I. vi is precisely that Scripture is needed as Guide and Teacher for anyone who would come 'to God the Creator' - rather than, for example, 'to some teaching about the Creator'.<sup>47</sup> After all, to use his own words:

What help is it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather, our knowledge [derived from the general teaching of Scripture] should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and having received it to credit it to his account.<sup>48</sup>

It is not doctrine alone that the general teaching of Scripture conveys: it is an encounter with God the Creator himself. 'The Lord represents himself to us in Scripture', says Calvin.<sup>49</sup> 'He manifests Himself there',<sup>50</sup> and 'reveals his majesty there'.<sup>51</sup>

These statements bring us to the question of Calvin's understanding of rhetoric. Briefly put, it may be said that Calvin views Scripture as the rhetorical Word of God. His logic seems to be that the nature of God is such that he is able to express his Truth in the doctrine of Scripture; and that because the doctrine of Scripture is the expression of the Truth of God, the knowledge it mediates is not information only, but something more effective, which amounts to an encounter with God. Drawing attention to

Calvin's tendency to employ terms which have particular significance in the rhetorical tradition - such as 'decorum', for instance, and 'accommodation' or 'persuasion' - Bouwsma suggests that

Rhetoric, indeed, had, for Calvin, some mysterious affinity with divinity. God's creation of the world was a magnificent expression of his rhetoric. God, as Calvin put it, had by his spoken word compelled 'the empty and formless matter of the world called chaos to shine with an admirable fitness and beauty.' The creation was marked throughout by the decorum of the Master Rhetorician.<sup>52</sup>

The work of God in creation furnishes a fine analogy for the work of God in the Scriptures in Calvin's theology. Scripture, just as much as Creation, is 'marked throughout with the decorum of the Master Rhetorician'. The point about the mediation of creation by the Word of God is that

God truly claims, and would have us grant him, omnipotence - not the empty, idle, and almost unconscious sort that the Sophists imagine, but a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity.<sup>53</sup>

The mediation of doctrine by the Word of God is of the same order: in the general teaching of Scripture as in creation, God is engaged in ceaseless activity, manifesting himself as the Creator to those who seek him there.

#### **God the Redeemer manifests himself in Scripture:**

The degree to which Calvin sustains the parallel in the *Institutes* between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer is remarkable. All that has been said about the general teaching of Scripture, which pertains to God as Creator, is true *a fortiori* of the doctrine of the Gospel, which pertains to God as Redeemer.

For instance, in relation to the knowledge of God the Creator, Calvin asks:

What is God? [*Quid est deus?*] Men who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort he is [*qualis sit*] and what is consistent with his nature... What help is it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?<sup>54</sup>

Then relation to the knowledge of God the Redeemer, he makes the parallel

assertion that

In understanding faith, it is not merely a question of knowing that God exists, but also - and this especially - of knowing what is his will toward us. For it is not so much our concern to know who he is in himself (*scire quis is se sit*) as what he wills to be toward us (*sed qualis esse nobis velit*).<sup>55</sup>

Now, the knowledge of what God 'wills to be toward us' is to be found in the doctrine of the Gospel, which is the proclamation of the grace of God manifest in Christ. For faith does not lean upon the general teaching of Scripture, but only upon the Gospel promises:

Since man's heart is not aroused to faith at every word of God, we must find out at this point what, strictly speaking, faith looks to in the Word... We do not deny that it is the function of faith to subscribe to God's truth, whenever and whatever and however it speaks. But we ask only what faith finds in the Word of the Lord upon which to lean and rest... Accordingly we need the promise of grace, which can testify to us that the Father is merciful; since we can approach him in no other way, and upon grace alone the heart of man can rest.<sup>56</sup>

We make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly rests. Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, and heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.<sup>57</sup>

The knowledge that God wills to be a Redeemer toward us is derived from the *doctrina Evangelii*. But Calvin does not mean that this knowledge is derived from a mere acquaintance with the gospel promises, as if a 'common assent to the gospel history' were enough.<sup>58</sup>

Calvin expresses his impatience with those who 'having nothing but the name and badge of Christ, yet wish to call themselves Christians'. He says that,

there is no intercourse with Christ save for those who have perceived the right understanding of Christ from the word of the Gospel... For it is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart... We have given the first place to the doctrine in which our religion is contained, since our salvation begins with it. But it must enter our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us. The philosophers rightly burn with anger against, and reproachfully drive from their flock, those who when they profess an art that ought to be the mistress of life,

turn it into sophisticated chatter. With how much better reason, then, shall we detest these trifling Sophists who are content to roll the gospel on the tips of their tongues when its efficacy ought to penetrate the inmost affections of the heart, take its seat in the soul, and effect the whole man a hundred times more deeply than the cold exhortations of the philosophers!<sup>59</sup>

The point is made most clearly: the word of the gospel is an active word. It is received only when it grasps and possesses the one who receives it. The truth of God which is expressed in the *doctrina Evangelii* ought to effect the whole man a hundred times more than any human rhetoric. 'The right understanding of Christ' to which Calvin refers and which comes from the word of the Gospel, is not a matter of gaining accurate information about Christ, but of experiencing an encounter, an intercourse, with Christ.

According to Calvin, it is not only doctrine about Christ, but an experience of Christ which is mediated in the Scriptures. His contention is that those who seek the knowledge of Christ in the doctrine of the gospel as it is mediated in the Scriptures receive not only information about Christ, but Christ himself.

This then is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father: namely, clothed with his Gospel.<sup>60</sup>

Scripture, for Calvin, is the bearer of the Word of God. In his comments on John 5.39, Calvin propounds his view that 'Christ cannot be properly known from anywhere but the Scriptures. And if that is so', he goes on

it follows that the Scriptures should be read with the purpose of finding Christ in them... Moreover, as we are commanded to seek Christ in the Scriptures, so He declares in this passage that our work will not be fruitless, for there the Father bears witness to his Son in such a way that he will manifest him to us beyond all doubt.<sup>61</sup>

The Father bears witness to Christ in the Scriptures in such a way that Christ is manifest beyond all doubt to those who seek him there. When Calvin says that 'all Scripture bears witness to Christ', he may be said to mean that 'Scripture is the bearer of Christ'.<sup>62</sup>

Here also Calvin's emphasis is on the continuing activity of God. As

much in the context of the knowledge of God the Redeemer as in the context of the knowledge of God the Creator, Calvin's understanding of the mediating function of Scripture is not confined to the mediation of a normative but static body of doctrine; once again he goes on to emphasise that in the teaching of Scripture is manifested the active presence of God.

**Conclusion:**

As an expression of the Eternal Word (or Wisdom) of God, the *verbum Dei* which is set before us in Scripture mediates doctrine relating to the knowledge of God as both Creator and Redeemer. Not only so, but as bearer of the Word of God, Scripture also mediates the knowledge of God himself. God manifests himself in the Scriptures as Creator and as Redeemer.

It emerges that Calvin's exposure to the rhetorical tradition has exercised a very great influence in the formulation of his understanding of the mediating function of the *Sacrum Verbum Dei*. Willis summarises the point very well:

Rather than strengthening the idea of a God who rules by demanding 'legalistic' obedience to his arbitrary and imperial-like decrees (the role Calvin's legal training is often asserted to have played in his theology), Calvin's humanistic legal training strengthened the view that God is one who accommodates himself to human weakness to restore men to their lost freedom, to persuade them of their vindication in Christ, and to inform, delight, and move them to live out their adoption as free sons. <sup>623</sup>

In Parts II and III of this thesis the attempt will be made to elucidate how it is that the knowledge of God is mediated in the Scriptures - how it is that the rhetorical Word of God persuades (a favourite word of Calvin's) those to whom it is addressed.

As this remark by Willis suggests, it is the influence of the rhetorical tradition which lies behind Calvin's persistent use of the principle of accommodation. Like a skilled orator, God tempers his Word to suit his audience. The principle of accommodation is the subject of Part

II.

In addition, it is the influence of the rhetorical tradition which lies behind Calvin's persistent emphasis on the inherent efficacy of the Word of God. Like a skilled orator, God expresses his Word with eloquence. In a sustained exploration of this theme in the Commentary on 1 Corinthians Calvin attributes the eloquence of the Word of God to the work of the Holy Spirit, who, he says has 'an eloquence of his own'.

It shines with a splendour that is natural to it, peculiar to itself, to use a better word, intrinsic (as they say), more than with assumed rhetorical instruments... It follows that the eloquence which is in keeping with the Spirit of God, is not bombastic and ostentatious, and does not make a lot of noise that amounts to nothing. Rather, it is genuine and efficacious, and has more sincerity than refinement.<sup>64</sup>

The work of the Spirit in relation to the Word of God is the subject of Part III.

NOTES

- 1 Comm. John 1.1, pp.8,9.
- 2 Parker: *Doctrine*, p.90.
- 3 These figures are as accurate as I have been able to achieve, with the aid of Battles: *Concordance*.
- 4 These figures are as accurate as I have been able to achieve, with the aid of Battles: *Concordance*.
- 5 *aeternus Sermo*: Eg.: Inst. I.xiii.10, p.133; II.xii.7, p.472; II.xiv.7, p.491 et al.  
*sacrum Verbum*: Eg.: Inst. I.vi.4, p.74; I.xiii.21, p.146; I.xviii.3, p.233 et al.
- 6 Inst. I.xiii.7, p.129; see Appendix, pp.218-219.
- 7 See especially pp.43-44 and pp.60-61.
- 8 Eg.: Inst. I.vii.1, p.74; III.ii.15, p.560.
- 9 Eg.: Inst. I.viii.1, p.70; I.xvi.6, p.205; II.xvi.6, p.511.
- 10 Eg.: Inst. I.xiv.14, p.173.

- 11 Eg.: Inst. I. xiv. 16, p. 175; III. 11. 17, p. 562.
- 12 Eg.: Inst. I. xi. 1, p. 99; II. 111. 8, p. 300; I. xii. 1, p. 112; I. xiv. 16, p. 175; II. v. 14, p. 335; III. 1v. 28, p. 655; I. xvii. 2, p. 212; II. xi. 10, p. 459.  
  
Eg.: Inst. I. xiii. 14, p. 138; I. xv. 2, p. 185; II. vi. 1, p. 343; III. 1v. 32, p. 660; IV. 6. 7, p. 1108 et al.
- 13 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 14 IV. 1. 12, p. 1025.
- 15 Battles: *Concordance*, gives 438 references.
- 16 Eg.: Inst. II. xvi. 2, OS 3. 484.
- 17 Eg.: Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72; I. xiii. 7, p. 129; IV. xvi. 31, p. 1355.
- 18 Inst. I. 11. 1, p. 40.
- 19 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 20 Eg.: Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 70; II. 1x. 2, p. 424.
- 21 Eg.: Inst. I. viii. 10, p. 90; IV. 1. 5, p. 1018.
- 22 Eg.: Inst. I. xvii. 8, p. 221; II. vii. 3, p. 352; II. viii. 51, p. 415.
- 23 Eg.: Inst. I. 1x. 1, p. 94; II. x. 3, p. 430; IV. xi. 1, p. 1213.
- 24 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p. 222. Dowey has a helpful discussion of the place of the Law in Calvin's thought in ch. 5, pp. 221-242.
- 25 Inst. II. viii. 1, pp. 367-368.
- 26 Inst. I. v. 10, p. 63.
- 27 Inst. II. vi. 1, p. 341.
- 28 Inst. II. viii. 51, p. 415.
- 29 Inst. II. vi. 1, p. 341.
- 30 Inst. II. vi. 1, p. 341.
- 31 Comm. Gen. Arg., p. 64.
- 32 Inst. II. T, p. 241.
- 33 Inst. II. 1x. 2, p. 425.
- 34 Inst. II. x. 1, p. 428; cf.: Inst. II. x. 4, pp. 431-432; II. xi. 13, p. 463.
- 35 Inst. III. xxi. 3, p. 924.
- 36 Inst. I. xiv. 4, p. 164; cf. I. vi. 2, p. 72; I. xiv. 20, p. 180.

- 37 Inst. P. A. , p. 12.
- 38 Inst. I. vi. 3, p. 73.
- 39 Inst. I. xiii. 3, p. 124.
- 40 J. K. S. Reid, "Calvin and the Authority of Scripture" in his *The Authority of Scripture: A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible* (Methuen and Co. Ltd., London 1957) ch. 2, pp. 41-42.
- 41 H. J. Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 1962) p. 63.
- 42 S. Selinger, *Calvin against Himself: An Inquiry in Intellectual History* (Archon Books, Hamden, Conn., 1984) p. 155.
- 43 Inst. II. viii. 50, p. 414.
- 44 The *utilitas* of doctrine is a familiar theme: see eg.: Inst. I. xvi. 3, p. 200; I. xvii. 1, 3, pp. 202, 206; Comm. Eph. 1. 4, p. 126.
- 45 Inst. I. xvii. T, p. 210; OS 3. 202.
- 46 Inst. I. ix. 1, p. 93.
- 47 Inst. I. vi. T, p. 69; see also Gen: Arg. p. 62.
- 48 Inst. I. 11. 2, pp. 41-42.
- 49 Inst. I. x. 1, p. 96.
- 50 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 71; I. viii. 7, p. 87.
- 51 Inst. I. viii. 13, p. 92;
- See also:  
God will be seen and adored in his word... God does not manifest himself to men otherwise than through the Word. Comm. Gen. 3. 16, p. 153.
- 52 W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (O. U. P., New York and Oxford 1988) p. 117; citing Comm. Ex. 31. 18. See also Comm. Ex. 4. 11.
- 53 Inst. I. xvi. 3, p. 200.
- 54 Inst. I. 11. 2, p. 41.
- 55 Inst. III. 11. 6 p. 549.
- 56 Inst. III. 11. 7, pp. 549-550.
- 57 Inst. III. 11. 13. p. 575,
- 58 Inst. III. 11. 1, p. 543.

59 Inst. II. vi. 4, pp. 687-688.

60 Inst. III. 11. 6, p. 548.

61 Comm. John. 5. 39, p. 139.

62 Inst. III. iv. 25, p. 651.

63 E. D. Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in A. J. McKelway and E. D. Willis eds., *The Context of Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honour of Paul Lehmann* (John Knox Press, Atlanta GA 1974) p. 48.

64 Comm. 1 Cor. 1. 17, p. 35.

**PARTS II AND III:  
THE WORD OF GOD AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD**

**INTRODUCTION:**

In the first half of this thesis, entitled *The Word of God and the Actuality of the Knowledge of God*, Calvin's conception of the actual character of the knowledge of God in the Word of God has been traced: from the Eternal Word of God in the Trinity, to the Incarnate Word of God in the Mediator, and finally to the written Word of God in the Scriptures. Throughout his discourse on the Word of God, it is Calvin's consistent affirmation that God is known only as and when he declares himself:

We must not imagine God according to the fancy of men, but must comprehend Him as He declares Himself to us.'

Let us leave to God the knowledge of Himself. For, as Hilary says, He is the one fit witness to Himself, and is not known except through Himself. But we shall be 'leaving it to Him' if we conceive Him to be as He reveals Himself to us, without enquiring about Him elsewhere than from His Word.<sup>2</sup>

Such statements are characteristic of Calvin's writings, and give a clear indication of his theological method. The Reformer conveys a profound sense of the priority and necessity and sufficiency of grace in salvation, and reiterates constantly the priority and necessity and sufficiency of revelation in theology. For Calvin it is only out of the given character of the actuality of the knowledge of God that we are able to consider the possibility of the knowledge of God. There is no possibility of the knowledge of God without the initiative of God, for it is not possible to know God outside his will to be known. For Calvin, any consideration of the possibility of the knowledge of God must arise directly out of the actuality of the knowledge of God. It is to a consideration of this possibility that we shall now turn.

Now although, for Calvin, the possibility of the knowledge of God is not a subject that can be considered in abstract, independent of the actual character of the knowledge of God, and although it is the case that Calvin

rejects any possibility of knowledge of God which does not arise out of God's self-disclosure,<sup>3</sup> nevertheless this movement from the actuality to the possibility of the knowledge of God to which Calvin clings so tightly is not to be considered in negative terms only. For all his insistence that questions about the possibility of the knowledge of God can only be answered in the light of the actuality of the knowledge of God, Calvin is very far from arguing that such questions should not be asked at all.

On the contrary, Calvin recognises that the character of the knowledge of God is such that it presses the knower beyond the actuality itself to a consideration of the possibility of this knowledge, and that the epistemological questions must be addressed.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the fact that knowledge of God is actually found in the Word of God provokes us to ask how this is possible. How is it possible for knowledge of God to be given in the Word of God? (That is to say, how is it possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken?) And how is it possible for knowledge of God to be received in this way? (That is to say, how is it possible for the Word of God to be truly heard?).

The epistemological question about the possibility of the knowledge of God therefore has two aspects: these two aspects bring us back to what Calvin himself calls 'the two-fold relation of the Word of God'. In his Commentary on John, Calvin speaks of the relation of the Word of God, first of all to God, and secondly also to men.<sup>5</sup> The epistemological question about the speaking of the Word of God is an attempt to elucidate the nature of the relation of the Word of God 'to God': how is it possible for the knowledge of God to be given in the Word of God? What is the nature of the relation between God and his Word, such that God is truly able to give himself to be known in the Word? The second epistemological question, about the hearing of the Word of God, is an attempt to elucidate the nature of the relation of the Word of God 'to men': how is it possible for the

knowledge of God given in the Word to be appropriated by humankind?

The question about the speaking of the Word of God - about the nature of the relation of the Word of God 'to God' - is explored primarily in terms of one of Calvin's favourite devices, the principle of accommodation. Calvin's use of this category as a device to relate in turn the Eternal Word of God (Chapter 4), the Person of the Mediator (Chapter 5) and the Scriptures (Chapter 6) to the Godhead will be outlined.<sup>6</sup>

A similar progression will be followed in the discussion of the hearing of the Word of God, which will be explored primarily in terms of Calvin's doctrine of the Spirit. Starting with the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to men' (Chapter 7), and turning to the relation of the Person of the Mediator 'to men' (Chapter 8), attention will finally be given to the relation of the Scriptures 'to men' (Chapter 9). In each case it will be found that it is the Holy Spirit who makes possible the appropriation of the Word of God by humankind.<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES:

- 1 Comm. Is. 52.6, Vol. 4, p. 98.
- 2 Inst. I. xiii. 21, p. 146.
- 3 Eg.: Comm. Rom. 1.22, p. 33; Inst. I. xi. 1, p. 100; I. xiv. 1, p. 160.
- 4 It is perhaps odd that a feature which is in fact so close to the heart of Calvin's theology, namely the principle that faith drives us to interpret the possibility of our knowledge of God by analogy with the reality of this knowledge, should in fact be so rarely explicit in Calvin's writings. Indeed, it is ironic that the passage in Calvin's writings which is closest to being an exposition of this principle is in fact something of a mis-reading of the apostle Paul. The *locus classicus*, the Reformer's comment upon Romans 12.6, refers to the *analogia fidei*. Comm. Rom. 12.6, p. 269, cf. Inst. P. A., p. 12, 13.
- 5 Comm. John 1. 1, p. 7.
- 6 See below, pp. 89-153.
- 7 See below, pp. 158-217.

**PART II;**  
**THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SPEAKING OF THE WORD OF GOD.**

**Introduction:**

The exploration of the possibility of the knowledge of God in the Word of God begins with the attempt to elucidate what Calvin calls the relation of the Word of God 'to God'. How is it possible for God to give himself to be known in his Word, according to the Reformer? How is it possible for the Word of God to be spoken?

The nature of the relationship between the Word of God and the Godhead is a fundamental issue for Calvin. Given his emphasis upon the grace of God in salvation and upon the revelation of God in theology, this is inevitably the case. Speaking generally, it may be said that the more stress is placed in theology upon the priority, sufficiency and necessity of revelation for the knowledge of God, the more urgent it becomes to clarify the nature of the relationship between the revelation of God and God himself. It follows that in Calvin's theology, questions about the nature of the relationship between the Word of God and the Godhead are absolutely fundamental, given that his emphasis upon the self-revelation of God in his Word is so final.

In any supposed revelation, a question about possibility arises out of the actuality. What is the nature of the relationship between the revelation and that which is revealed? What identity is there between these two, and what distinction? Calvin's consistent assertions that all knowledge of God depends upon the initiative of God makes these questions of particular importance in the study of his work. In this section, these questions about the possibility of the knowledge of God are addressed first to the Eternal Word of God (Chapter 4), and subsequently to the Incarnate Word of God (Chapter 5) and to the Scriptures (Chapter 6). In each case the attempt is made to establish how Calvin relates the particular form of

the Word of God to the Godhead, what kind of identity he assumes in each case between them, and what kind of distinction.

It will be found that the discussion of the speaking of the Word of God amounts to a study of the principle of 'accommodation' in Calvin's theology, for it is in terms of this principle that Calvin relates the Word of God to the Godhead. That is to say, in Calvin's theology, the Word of God is related to God as the accommodation of God. The speaking of the Word of God is possible because in his Word God accommodates himself to human capacity. Calvin employs the principle of accommodation to clarify both the kind of identity, and the kind of distinction, that exists between the Godhead and the Word of God in all its forms.

- CHAPTER 4 -

ACCOMMODATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SPEAKING OF  
THE ETERNAL WORD OF GOD.

**Introduction:**

What is to be made of Calvin's assertion that the Word of God has a two-fold relation, and what are its implications for the relationship of the Eternal Word of God 'to God'? What kind of identity is there between the Eternal Word of God and the Godhead, in Calvin's estimation, and what degree of distinction? These questions are of considerable importance if an account is to be given of the self-giving of God in his Word.

In the first instance, the question of the relation of the Eternal Word of God to the Godhead is a question about Calvin's understanding of the Trinity. It will therefore be necessary to return to Calvin's comment about the two-fold relation of the Word of God, in order to explore its implications for his doctrine of the Trinity. It will be suggested that it is by this two-fold relation of the Word of God that the doctrine of the Trinity is harnessed to the possibility of the knowledge of God, in Calvin's exposition. For Calvin, that is, the two-fold relation of the Word of God implies that, even within the Godhead, the Word of God exists as the accommodation of God - or more accurately, as the accommodating act of God.<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to conceive of the Word of God except in the act of accommodation; the self-accommodation of God is essential to the nature of the Eternal Word of God.

But in the second place it will become evident that it is also the principle of accommodation which serves to define the extent of the identity and the distinction between the Eternal Word of God and the Godhead in Calvin's thought. In practice Calvin resorts to the principle of accommodation in order to explain how it is that God is

able to give himself to be known in his Word, and yet also how it is that the initiative of God is retained when such knowledge is given. In other words, it is by appealing to accommodation that Calvin expounds the nature of the relation of the Word of God 'to God'.

### **The Relation of the Word of God 'to God', and Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity:**

Given that the inner logic which underlies Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God has a trinitarian dynamic, and given that the actuality of the *duplex cognitio Dei* is in fact trinitarian in character because of the two-fold relation of the Word of God,<sup>2</sup> it will be no surprise to find that another effect of Calvin's interpolation of the Word of God between the nature of God and the knowledge of God is to establish a link between his doctrine of the Trinity and the possibility of the knowledge of God. The emphasis Calvin places on the mediating function of the Word of God makes the relationship between the Word of God and the nature of God a matter of some importance. It emerges that an important purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity in Calvin's theology is to define this relationship in such a way as to demonstrate the possibility of the knowledge of God. Indeed, it may be that the real creativity of the way Calvin develops his doctrine of the Trinity only emerges when it is considered in this way.

It is in his comments upon the opening verses of the Gospel of John that Calvin sets out most clearly and most creatively the role of the Word of God in harnessing the doctrine of the Trinity to that of the possibility of the knowledge of God. It is probably the case that in the corresponding section of the *Institutes*<sup>3</sup>, where the discussion follows a thoroughly traditional pattern, Calvin is so concerned to leave his orthodoxy beyond doubt that some of his originality is lost.

At any rate, the Commentary on the Gospel of John goes further than the *Institutes* in establishing the role of the Word of God in binding the Trinity to the possibility of the knowledge of God. It is there that Calvin speaks of the 'two-fold relation' of the Word to which we have already referred.<sup>4</sup> The Word has a relation both 'to God and to men'.

The phrase 'the two-fold relation of the Word of God' is an important one - and, it would seem, one coined by Calvin himself.<sup>5</sup> His suggestion seems to be that the Word of God is both 'God in himself' (participating in the nature of God himself), and also 'God in his relationship with men' (revealing the nature of God to humanity).

Even within the relation of the Word of God 'to God', however, a distinction between the two is implied by the particular function assigned to the Word of God within the Trinity. In the same passage of his Commentary on the Gospel of John, Calvin draws out the implication of the fact that the Son of God is referred to as God's 'Word':

I think [the evangelist] calls the Son of God 'the Word' simply because, first, He is the eternal wisdom and will of God, and secondly, because He is the express image of his purpose.<sup>6</sup>

In his relation to the Godhead, the substantial Word is both to be identified with it, as 'the eternal will of God', and yet to be distinguished from it as 'the express image of his purpose'. It is interesting to return to the *Institutes* with this concept taken from the Commentary on the Gospel of John in mind, for although the two-fold relation of the Word of God is not explicit there, this duality within the relation of the Word of God 'to God' is perhaps hinted at when Calvin refers in the course of his remarks to these opening verses of John's Gospel. He observes that, 'John at once attributes to the Word a solid and abiding essence, and ascribes something uniquely his own.'<sup>7</sup> The 'solid and abiding essence' is that which identifies the Eternal Word of God with the Godhead. According to Calvin, the Word of God is

truly God: the Word was always with God and was God. But the 'something uniquely his own' is the particular function which belongs to the Eternal Word of God within the Godhead, and which distinguishes the Word 'from God'.

Presumably because it strikes him as a feature of some significance, Calvin observes that the evangelist attributes these two things ('a solid and abiding essence', and 'something uniquely his own') to the Word not serially but 'at once'. The Word is not now this and then that, but both things at once. It follows from this that the Word has this identity with the Godhead and this distinction within it constantly and by nature.

In other words, it is this relation of the Word of God 'to God' which guarantees the revelation, and makes possible the knowledge of God. That is to say, according to Calvin, the Word is not simply an intermediary, a go-between, or some kind of messenger from God to humankind. By stressing that the Word of God has a relation 'to God', Calvin expresses his conviction that the possibility of the knowledge of God rests upon the fact that the Word of God constantly and completely participates in the being of God and yet is distinguished from it.

In this way, the relation of the Word of God to God both ties Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity to the possibility of the knowledge of God, and animates his treatment of the Trinity itself. For Calvin attributes God's willingness and capacity to reveal and accommodate himself to humankind, and to offer himself for the contemplation of his creation, precisely to the trinitarian nature of his being. To put it briefly: Calvin observes that because God is three, there is that within God which may go out from himself in revelation; and because God is one, that which goes out from God is God himself, and no other.

Calvin keeps these two points constantly in view when he discusses

the three persons of the Trinity in Book I. xlii of the *Institutes*. Calvin affirms there the witness of the Scriptures to the three 'persons' or 'hypostases' in God, by its use of the names of 'Father', 'Son', and 'Holy Spirit'. In this context, the 'three-ness' of the persons of the Trinity is clearly important to Calvin: he speaks of a 'real distinction' between them.<sup>20</sup> It is apparent that Calvin was extremely suspicious of any attempt to blur this distinction. He refers anxiously, for instance, to Sabellius, who happily confessed his faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but in Calvin's judgement meant nothing more by it than if he had spoken of God as 'strong and just and wise'.<sup>21</sup> Calvin's fear seems to be that if these distinctions in God are not taken seriously, and the persons of the Trinity are dissolved merely into attributes of God, then God himself ceases to be accessible to us in his revelation. In particular, unless the Word of God is somehow distinguished from the Godhead within their relation, how can God give himself to be known in his Word?

But at once we are brought up again against the 'one-ness' of God. Calvin insists that this is how it ought to be. Quoting Gregory of Nazianzus with 'delight', he says:

I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendour of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.<sup>22</sup>

If God really is a Trinity, he argues, the 'distinctions' in the Godhead are no more than that.

Indeed, the words "Father", "Son", and "Spirit" imply a real distinction - let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty - but a distinction, not a division.<sup>23</sup>

The distinctions between 'Father', 'Son', and 'Spirit' are distinctions of God's persons, not divisions of his substance. Calvin explains that to say that the Word of God has a relation 'to God' is to distinguish

the Word of God from the Godhead: but it is not to divide the Godhead, or to separate the Word of God from it.

By these appellations which set forth the distinction [between the persons of the Trinity]... is signified their mutual relationships and not the very substance by which they are one.<sup>12</sup>

And because the essence of God is one, 'in each hypostasis the whole divine nature is understood.'<sup>13</sup>.

The suggestion is that Calvin harnesses his doctrine of the Trinity directly to his doctrine of the possibility of the knowledge of God by the simple device of identifying that which goes out from God in his self-revelation as the 'Word' of God. The device is simple, but it is not arbitrary. Calvin explains his identification of the two in his Commentary on John 1.1. The description there of the Son of God as 'ὁ λόγος' - rendered *Sermo* by Calvin - prompts him to write:

For just as in men speech is called the expression of his thoughts, so it is not inappropriate to apply this to God and say that he expresses Himself to us by His Speech or Word.<sup>14</sup>

When Calvin goes on to speak of 'a two-fold relation' of the Word of God, he means that the Word of God is the most adequate expression and revelation of God himself, because of both the nature of God himself and the nature of humankind, created in God's image. Clearly, this identification of that which goes out from God in self-revelation as the Word is a device which tells us a great deal about Calvin's understanding of the nature of God, and which has enormous implications both for his use of Scripture and for the shape of his theology. More will be said in due course about the relation of the Word of God 'to men', and its implications for the nature of humanity in due course,<sup>15</sup> but it should be noted at this point that the implication of the relation of the Word of God 'to God' himself is that, according to Calvin, the nature of God is such that the Word is the most appropriate expression and revelation of it.

Torrance justifiably observes that at this important point Calvin departs from the Augustinian tradition that the divine communication takes the form of Word only as it enters the fallen world. The Augustinian and scholastic tradition that, in itself, the divine communication is wordless, and that the essence of God is pure '*intelligere*', is rejected here by Calvin in favour of the patristic - Athanasian - tradition, taken up also by Anselm, that God is in himself essentially and eternally Word. When Calvin writes that God 'expresses Himself to us by His Speech', and that before He 'revealed Himself by His Word, He formerly had Him within Himself, hidden'<sup>16</sup>, he is in fact echoing Anselm's contention that the essence of God is not only '*intelligere*', but actually '*dicere*'.<sup>17</sup>

Thus according to Calvin: because he is three, God is able to make himself known in his Word; because he is one, what is known in that Word is God himself. This 'identity and yet distinction' is implied by the relation of the Word of God 'to God'. It belongs to the essence of the Word of God to be distinguished from God and yet related to him, for the Word exists as that within God by which he is able to go out from himself in revelation.

The implication is that, even within the Godhead, the Word of God exists constantly as the accommodation of God - or more accurately, as the accommodating act of God. It is not possible to conceive of the Word of God except in the act of accommodation, because the self-accommodation of God is essential to the nature of the Eternal Word of God. It is not the case that the Word of God becomes the accommodating act of God only in the course of a particular act of revelation. At least, this is not a possibility Calvin addresses, because he takes the Word to be constantly acting to reveal the nature of God: this activity is proper to his nature. It is not possible to separate the Word of God

from the function of revelation in Calvin's thought, and therefore it is not possible to separate the Word of God from the act of accommodation. It is not possible to consider an 'unaccommodated' Word of God. The pattern of the self-accommodation of God is to be considered in the light of this.

**The Relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God' and Calvin's Principle of Accommodation:**

The relation of the Word of God 'to God' is such that the self-accommodation of God is essential to its nature. As we have seen, this means that the Word of God is constantly acting according to its nature, making possible the knowledge of God in revelation. But it also means that wherever the Word of God is encountered it is encountered as the self-accommodation of God. This is a fundamental fact of divine revelation according to Calvin:

When [God] speaks to us, he accommodates Himself to our capacity.<sup>16</sup>

There can be no exceptions to this rule, for

We cannot fully comprehend God in His greatness, but... there are certain limits within which men ought to confine themselves, even as God accommodates to our limited capacity every declaration which He makes of Himself. Only fools, therefore, seek to know the essence of God.<sup>17</sup>

Given that this possibility arises out of the relation of the Word of God 'to God', it nevertheless remains to be seen how, in any particular act of revelation, God gives himself to be known in his Word. It is, in fact, at this point in his thought that Calvin develops his use of this category of accommodation, as a means of defining the extent of the identity between the revelation of God and the Word in which it is given, and also the distinction between the two.

Recent studies have drawn attention to the many other, primarily

exegetical, uses to which Calvin puts this device<sup>20</sup> and it will be necessary to attend to some of these in our exploration of the speaking of the Word of God in the Scriptures; but the concern of the present discussion is narrower. At this point it is Calvin's use of the category of accommodation as a means of expressing his understanding of the way in which the Eternal Word of God is related to the Godhead (ie: the way in which the revelation relates to that which is revealed) which is of particular interest.

There are three strands of thought which recur frequently when Calvin employs the concept of accommodation in this way. The three are as follows:

i. Calvin consistently maintains that each and every act of divine accommodation in the Word rests upon the initiative of God.

ii. Calvin acknowledges that every act of accommodation serves as a veiling of God: he acknowledges a distinction between God as he is in himself, and God as he accommodates himself to our capacity in his Word.

iii. Nevertheless, Calvin firmly insists that every act of accommodation is genuinely a revelation of God. It is truly God who is made known in his self-accommodation in his Word; this reflects the fundamental identity Calvin presupposes between the Word of God and the Godhead.

We shall briefly consider each of these themes.

#### **1. The Eternal Word of God, Accommodation and the Initiative of God:**

The consistency with which Calvin maintains that every revelation of God is an act of accommodation to human weakness or sinfulness serves to emphasise the Reformer's fundamental principle that *all* knowledge of God depends upon the initiative of God. Even when he is not explicitly using the terminology of 'accommodation', the concept is often present in

Calvin's thoughts about the self-revelation of God:

Because we cannot ascend to that height, it is needful for God to conform Himself to our ignorance, and to descend in some way to us since we cannot ascend to Him.<sup>21</sup>

The very notion of accommodation reiterates the dependency of humankind upon God for knowledge of God. Dowe's definition of the concept of accommodation makes the point well:

The term accommodation refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.<sup>22</sup>

Basic to Calvin's concept of accommodation is this dependence of humanity upon the gracious will of God: the self-accommodation of God in the Word occurs by the grace of God alone.

As we cannot attain to that infinite height to which he is exalted, in descending among us by the exercise of his power and grace, he appears as near to us as is needful and as our limited capacity will bear.<sup>23</sup>

It is God who accommodates himself to human capacity in his Word; he cannot be 'accommodated' against his Will. The initiative of God is essential to the self-revelation of God.

Moreover, in Calvin's thought it is clear that God never surrenders his initiative in his self-accommodation. Battles has drawn attention to the startling fact that

at least in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and presumably elsewhere, [Calvin] never uses the noun *accommodatio*, but always either the verb *accommodare* or *attemperare*, when he has recourse to this principle.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin consistently treats the self-accommodation of God as an act, or a series of acts: the accommodation of God is never reduced by Calvin to the status of an object, as if the initiative of God were surrendered at some point. Calvin insists that the initiative of God is never jeopardised in the process of the revelation of God in his Word. This note is of course entirely in harmony with the consistent emphasis Calvin places upon the grace of God throughout his theological exposition.

ii. **The Eternal Word of God, Accommodation and the Veiling of God:**

The importance of this last point to Calvin may be illustrated further with reference to what he calls 'the veiling' of God. Frequently when he is engaged in a consideration of the nature of the relationship between God himself on one hand and a given act of his self-accommodation in the Eternal Word of God on the other, Calvin is careful not to suggest an absolute and exhaustive identification of the two. Proceeding from his premise that whenever God gives himself to be known, the act is from first to last an act of grace, Calvin argues that God never relinquishes the initiative in the accommodation of himself to human capacity, for 'His essence always remains hidden'. In every self-revelation of God in his Word, something is kept back.

When Calvin employs the principle of accommodation to elucidate his understanding of the Incarnation, we shall see that he frequently says that the self-accommodation of God in Christ involves a 'veiling' as well as a 'revealing' of the divine nature. One would expect Calvin to employ the same term in the present context, with reference to the self-accommodation of God in the Eternal Word. Indeed, the *concept* of this 'veiling' is present, so that Wallace is right to generalise that for Calvin:

in all revelation there is a veiling. Calvin is never weary of repeating that God covers over his face when he reveals himself.<sup>25</sup>

But surprisingly, I have not been able to find a single example of the use of term 'veil' in this sense, anywhere in the Reformer's writings, except specifically in relation to the Incarnation. Instead, Calvin expresses the same idea - that in every self-revelation of God something is held back - in relation to the Eternal Word of God by appealing to the passages in the Old Testament in which God appeared to his people in a cloud or in smoke. Calvin takes the significance of these passages to be that when God appears to his people, he nevertheless covers himself.

The purpose of this, he says, is firstly, that the initiative in the self-revelation of God remains with God. That is to say, the 'cloud' (in the Exodus theophany) or the 'smoke' (see below) sets the limits to God's self-disclosure, and places a proper restraint on human curiosity. In a comment on the call of Isaiah, Calvin asks why it was that God appeared to the prophet in 'a house filled with smoke'? His answer is that,

First it was always the will of God to repress the insolence of men, in pushing their inquiries about his majesty beyond what is proper; for on this point almost all men are too rash and daring... Whenever, therefore, smoke of this kind is mentioned let us know that it lays a restraint upon us from indulging curiosity in our researches into the purpose of God.<sup>26</sup>

This veil of smoke is the means by which God keeps his essence to himself. It ensures that under whatever form he chooses to reveal himself:

the essence or majesty of God [is] not shut up in it, nor his power and operation fixed to it.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, this covering serves to protect those to whom the revelation comes, who would doubtless be consumed by an open revelation of the glory of God. It is an accommodation to the finite capacity of human creatures. The 'cleft of the rock' from which Moses 'saw' God serves this function too:

Although God revealed himself to Moses in a peculiar manner, still he never appeared in the fulness of his glory, but only so far as man's infirmity could endure.<sup>28</sup>

Moses had indeed seen [the face of God] but in such a mode of revelation as to be far inferior to its full effulgence.<sup>29</sup>

Because Moses could not have endured its 'full effulgence', the revelation God gave to him was accommodated to human infirmity.

On occasions, then, Calvin's language suggests that the concept of accommodation implies a very real distinction between God himself and his self-revelation in his Word. It is not 'God as he is in himself' who is made known in an act of accommodation in the Word, but 'God as he is *pro nobis*', 'God as befits our weakness':

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as

nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us. Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God like as accommodate the knowledge of Him to our slight capacity. To do this He must descend far beneath His loftiness.<sup>30</sup>

For because our weakness does not attain to His exalted state, the description of Him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for Him to represent Himself to us not as He is in Himself, but as He seems to us.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to notice Calvin's purpose in drawing on the principle of accommodation to make a distinction between God and his self-revelation in his Word in this way: it is to underline the necessity of the grace of God. God is known only so far as he gives himself to be known. But if this is Calvin's primary purpose in employing the category of accommodation in this context, there is another, related to it. The distinction Calvin makes allows him trace the continuity of God's self-revelation through diverse forms. Although the self-accommodation of God in his Word may change, this does not mean that God himself is changeable.

God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each... In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. rather, he has accommodated himself to men's capacity, which is varied and changeable.<sup>32</sup>

The form of the self-accommodation of God in his Word may vary; indeed, it is bound to, considering that humankind is so changeable. But given the distinction that exists between God and his Word, changes in the form taken by the Word do not imply changes in the nature of God.

In due course we will find that there is a third strand in Calvin's understanding of accommodation, which emphasises that every act of accommodation is genuinely a revelation of God, with a positive content which is not to be despised, and in which the fundamental identity between the Eternal Word of God and the Godhead is affirmed. But in fact there is a positive aspect even to these expressions about the veiling of God in

accommodation and to the distinction between God and his self-revelation in the Word which they imply.

The positive aspect of the distinction springs from the recognition in the knower that the self-revelation of God in his Word is always an accommodation. The recognition that the knowledge of God is in fact 'accommodated' to our capacity is part of its glory. That is to say, the accommodation of our knowledge of God is not simply a deprivation: it is itself part of what we know of God - namely that he is infinite and that our grasp of him is limited, dependent and graciously given.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Calvin makes the point that the recognition that there is more to be known about God than we are able to know of him in his Word, enriches what we do know.<sup>34</sup>

### **iii. The Eternal Word of God, Accommodation and the Revelation of God:**

However much Calvin qualifies the identity between God in himself and God in his self-revelation in the Word, he does so only in order to emphasise that God does not surrender his initiative in making himself known. The qualifications Calvin makes do not amount to a complete distinction between the Godhead and the Eternal Word of God. Calvin will not allow a wedge to be driven between God himself and any revelation of himself which he grants to humankind in the Word.

Indeed, Calvin is careful to ensure that his qualifications are not misunderstood in this way. For instance, in a passage in his Commentary on Isaiah, Calvin assesses the vision of the glory of God that came to the prophet in the Temple. He begins by qualifying the nature of what Isaiah saw. This was no direct apprehension of God:

Though men may be said to creep on the ground, there is no absurdity in supposing that God comes down to them in such a manner as to cause some kind of mirror to reflect the rays of His glory. There was therefore exhibited to Isaiah such a form as enabled him, according to his capacity, to perceive the inconceivable majesty of God.<sup>35</sup>

But these qualifications about the capacity of the prophet do not rob the vision of the presence of God:

Hence we learn the profitable doctrine that whenever God grants any token of his presence, He is undoubtedly present with us, for He does not amuse us with unmeaning shapes... Since therefore, the exhibition was no deceitful representation of the presence of God, Isaiah justly declares that he *saw Him*.. In the representation there is no deception.<sup>36</sup>

As Calvin puts it elsewhere:

Although God has never appeared in his immeasurable glory and has never manifested himself as he really exists, yet we must nevertheless hold that he has so appeared as to leave no doubt in the minds of his servants as to their knowing that they have seen God.<sup>37</sup>

It is important not to miss the force with which Calvin insists upon the positive value of the knowledge which God gives of himself in his Word: the fact that it is an accommodated knowledge is by no means an indication of its unimportance or insufficiency.

For there is an open and naked revelation of God in the Word (enough to meet our needs), and there is nothing recondite (*involutum*) about it, as unbelievers imagine. to keep us in a state of uncertainty.<sup>38</sup>

If the knowledge God gives of himself is obscure in any sense, it is so only relatively speaking:

Therefore we must understand it this way: that the knowledge of God, which we now derive from His Word, is undoubtedly reliable and true, and there is nothing muddled, or unintelligible or dark about it; but when it is called 'obscure' (*aenigmaticum*) it is in a relative way, because it falls a long way short of that clear revelation to which we look forward, when we shall see face to face.<sup>39</sup>

When God accommodates himself to human capacity, to grant to his creatures a knowledge of himself in his Word, this knowledge is not to be despised.

#### Conclusion:

It is to the category of accommodation that Calvin turns, then, in order to elucidate the nature of this relation of the Word of God 'to God'. In so far as it defends the initiative of God against human presumption, Calvin's emphasis on the principle of accommodation serves to underline the

priority of the grace of God in the knowledge of God. Similarly, his sense of the necessity of the grace of God for the knowledge of God, constrains him to accentuate the veiling of God in his self-accommodation, and the distinction between God and his Word. In the same way, when Calvin affirms that in every act of divine self-accommodation it is truly God himself who is known, because of the fundamental identity between God and his Word, it is an affirmation of the sufficiency of the grace of God.

**NOTES:**

- 1 See below, p. 95.
- 2 See Chapter 1.
- 3 I. xiii. 7, pp. 129-130.
- 4 See pp. 39f. above.
- 5 This is the case as far as I have been able to ascertain.
- 6 Comm. John 1. 1, p. 7.
- 7 Inst. I. xiii. 7, p. 130.
- 8 Inst. I. xiii. 17, p. 141.
- 9 Inst. I. xiii. 4, p. 125.
- 10 Inst. I. xiii. 17, p. 141.
- 11 Inst. I. xiii. 17, p. 141.
- 12 Inst. I. xiii. 19, p. 143.
- 13 Inst. I. xiii. 19, p. 143.

It is worth noting that these two points - relating respectively to the 'three-ness' and the 'one-ness' of God, to use Calvin's own language (these are the paragraph headings at I. xiii. 16, p. 140, and I. xiii. 17, p. 141.) - act as twin pressures in Calvin's theology which together constrain him to exalt the person of Christ. Calvin explicitly acknowledges in the *Institutes* his need to 'demonstrate the deity of the Son' (I. xiii. 7, p. 129). Given Calvin's premise that knowledge of God is possible only at the initiative of God, as God gives himself to be known, and his claim that God is known in his Word, it is obviously doubly in his interests to put beyond doubt the deity of Christ, the 'Son' and 'Word' of God. God is only able to disclose himself in his

Word if the Word is God; and if the Word is God, then it is God and no other who is disclosed in it. That is to say, it is Calvin's Christocentric epistemology which drives him to a theological emphasis upon the deity of the Christ as the Word of God. In his discussions of the Trinity, for instance, it is really the divinity of Christ which is at stake for Calvin. As Niesel puts it, "The purpose of Calvin's Trinitarianism is to secure the Biblical message 'God is revealed in the flesh' against false interpretations." [W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Lutterworth Press, London 1956) p.57.] The knowledge of God in the Word of God is possible only because of the two-fold relation of the Word, and the trinitarian character of God himself.

- 14 Comm. John 1.1, p.7.
- 15 See Chapter 7.
- 16 Comm. John 1.1, p.7.
- 17 I am indebted for this paragraph to a conversation with Prof. T. F. Torrance, which took place in in 1988.
- 18 Comm. 1 Cor. 2.7, p.54.
- 19 Comm. Rom. 1.19, p.31; cf. Comm. Dan. 7.9, Vol.2. p.34.
- 20 T. Baxter, "What did Calvin Teach about Accommodation?" *Evangel* 6 (1988) pp.20-22.  
D. F. Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary," *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986) pp.33-50.  
Battles: *God was Accommodating Himself*.
- 21 Comm. Ezek. 18.32, C. T. S. Vol.2, p.265.
- 22 Dowey: *Knowledge*, p.3.
- 23 Comm. Ps. 78.60, Vol.3, p.270.
- 24 Battles: *God was Accommodating Himself*, p.19.
- 25 R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1953) p.7.
- 26 Comm. Is. 6.4, Vol.1, pp.206-207. See also Comm. Ex. 33.18, Vol.3, p.377.
- 27 Comm. Ps. 47.5, Vol.2, p.211.
- 28 Comm. Ex. 33.11, Vol.3, p.372.
- 29 Comm. Ex. 33.20, Vol.3, p.381.
- 30 Inst. I. xiiii. 1, p.121.
- 31 Inst. I. xvii. 13, p.227.
- 32 Inst. II. xi. 13, pp.462, 463.



- 33 This is the force of Torrance's analogy of our perception of, say, a statue, seen from the front. Although all we see is the facing side of the statue, what we see tells us that there is more to the statue than we can see of it. In the same way, what we do know of God informs us that there is more that we do not know. But what we know also allows us to infer that what we do not know will be in character with what we do know.
- 34 There is a further positive aspect to the element of 'veiling' in every act of accommodation, which arises out of Calvin's conviction that humankind would be utterly overwhelmed by an unveiled revelation of the essence of God. Calvin tirelessly emphasises the limited nature of the human capacity for the knowledge of God. This capacity is 'slight', and 'weak', and unable to bear anything other than an accommodated, veiled revelation of God. Parker expresses this well:

"Since to see [God] in his essence would destroy us, it is necessary that if He show himself to us, He shall do so under a form that will be within our experience, and shall neither harm us nor drive us away from Him, but shall - as Calvin was fond of saying in His sermons - 'gently allure us to him.'" (*Doctrine*, p.105).

Given that the essence of God is veiled in this way, it is instructive to explore Calvin's writings for some elaboration of just what it is about the essence of God which poses such a threat to man in his limited capacity. With notable frequency, Calvin refers to that which is veiled as 'the glory', 'the splendour', 'the radiance', 'the brightness', 'the majesty' or 'the richness' of God. It is an interesting (and neglected) observation that Calvin characterises the essence of God in these ways. Presumably, the way in which Calvin characterises the essence of God betrays a great deal about his understanding of God.

35 Comm. Is. 6. 1, Vol. 1, p. 200.

36 Comm. Ezek. 1. 28, Vol. 1, p. 106.

37 Comm. 1 Cor. 13. 12, p. 282.

38 Comm. 1 Cor. 13. 12, p. 282.

- CHAPTER 5 -

ACCOMMODATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SPEAKING OF  
THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD.

**Introduction:**

How is it possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken, and for God truly to give himself to be known, in the Word made flesh? The questions arise directly out of the foregoing study of the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God'.

It has been argued in Chapter 4 that according to Calvin the relation of the Word of God 'to God' defines the essence of the Word of God as the self-accommodating act of God. That is to say, the Frenchman asserts that by its very nature the Word of God is related to the Godhead in such a way as to be at once identified with it and distinguished from it, and that the Word of God is therefore that within the Godhead which is by nature uniquely constituted to be the self-accommodating act of God. The purpose of the present study is to establish that, for Calvin, what is true of the Eternal Word is all the more true of the Incarnate Word of God.

As one would expect, Calvin's understanding of the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God' has considerable bearing upon the present discussion; it is no surprise to find that he articulates his doctrine of the Incarnation in terms similar to those with which he defines the place of the Eternal Word of God within the Trinity. As a result, the shape of the present discussion has many points of contact with that of Chapter 4, the importance of which will emerge. What is of chief interest here is not simply that Calvin draws on the category of accommodation in the attempt to clarify his understanding of the relation of the Incarnate Word of God 'to God', just as he does in the attempt to define the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God', but that in the context of the Incarnation the category is significantly developed.

It should not, however, be inferred from the parallels that emerge between the present discussion and Chapter 4, that Calvin's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, and of the place of the Eternal Word of God within it, determines the shape of his doctrine of the Incarnation. It would be a mistake to conclude on the basis of these parallels that Calvin derives his understanding of the Incarnation from his understanding of the Trinity; in fact his thought runs in the opposite direction entirely - all that he has to say about the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God' is a consequence of his understanding of the person of the Mediator, and of his doctrine of the Incarnation. As far as the category of accommodation is concerned, the point is that Calvin does not assert that we may speak of the Incarnation as an accommodating act of God because every self-revelation of God is an act of accommodation, but that we may know that every self-revelation of God is accommodated to our capacity, because this is true of the Incarnation. The direction of inference is important.<sup>2</sup>

The progression, then, which is made in this thesis at this point, from the Eternal Word of God to the Word made flesh is not a reflection of Calvin's theological method, as if he wished to suggest that a discussion of the possibility of the speaking of the Incarnate Word is to be attempted only in the light of a study of the possibility of the speaking of the Eternal Word. What this progression does reflect, of course, is Calvin's own practice in the *Institutes*, where the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to God' is raised in Book I, and the relation of the Incarnate Word of God 'to God' only in Book II. In the *Institutes*, however, this progression serves to emphasise the continuity Calvin presupposes between the Eternal and the Incarnate Word of God, and the temporal - but emphatically not the 'theological' - priority of the Eternal Word. The conclusion towards which the present study moves is that according to Calvin the 'theological' priority belongs to the Incarnate Word, in the sense that it is primarily

from the Word made flesh that our understanding of the possibility of the speaking of the Word of God is derived. Calvin himself puts it as follows:

It was not part of the Word that Christ brought, but the last, closing Word... If God has now spoken His last Word, it is right to advance thus far, just as we must halt our steps when we arrive at Him.<sup>3</sup>

For Calvin, the Incarnation is not one manifestation of the Word of God among others, or 'part of the Word': Christ Jesus is the Last (i.e.: the Definitive) Word of God.

### **The Relation of the Word made flesh to God, and Calvin's Doctrine of the Incarnation:**

The question about the speaking of the Word of God which arises generally throughout Calvin's Word-centred theology is at its most acute where his consideration of the person of the Mediator is concerned. How is it possible for God to give himself to be known in this person? What does it mean to speak - in Calvin's favourite description of the Incarnation - of '*Deus manifestatus in carne*'. In what sense is it possible to speak of God as 'manifested in the flesh'? In what sense is it possible to speak of Jesus Christ as God? In what sense is this human person 'the Word made flesh'? What is the nature of the identity between the person of the Mediator, and God? And what is the nature of the distinction between the two?

In fact Calvin is not slow to admit the limits of his ability to answer these questions. The relationship between the Godhead and the person of the Mediator is ultimately a 'hidden and incomprehensible mystery'.<sup>4</sup> But it is a mystery open to some degree of investigation and understanding, and it is to this end that Calvin devotes Book II, chapters xii-xiv in his *Institutes*, as well as much of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the *Commentary* that Calvin remarks that the Evangelist

teaches the nature of the coming of Christ... - that, clothed with our flesh, He showed himself openly to the world. Although the evangelist touches only briefly upon the ineffable mystery of the Son of God putting on human nature, this brevity is wonderfully clear.<sup>6</sup>

It is obvious, even from this brief extract, that it is no embarrassment to Calvin to say that the Eternal Word of God became flesh. Indeed, the passage is something of a favourite of his (it is cited four times in the *Institutes*<sup>7</sup>) and the expression that in the Incarnation the Word was 'clothed with our flesh' is characteristic of much of *Institutes* II. xii-xiv.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Calvin makes explicit his preference for this kind of expression. Commenting on the passage in 1 Timothy which refers to the one 'who was manifested in the flesh', he asserts that

the most fitting description of Christ's person is contained in these words: *Deus manifestatus in carne.*<sup>9</sup>

In one sense, however, all this only aggravates the question of the possibility of the speaking of the Word made flesh. How is it possible that in Christ, God is manifested *in the flesh*?

In the first place, it is important to see that for Calvin much of the significance of the Incarnation lies precisely in its 'inappropriateness'. He does not seek to minimise the force of the expression 'the Word became flesh', but rather makes a great deal of the degree to which this act amounts to a 'stooping' by the Word of God to the lowly human state. He is at pains in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* to emphasise

how great is the distance between the spiritual glory of the Word of God and the stinking filth of our flesh.<sup>10</sup>

This is the language of accommodation, about which more will be said in due course. At present it is sufficient to note that Calvin views the Incarnation as an act of accommodation in which the Word of God has stooped from his lofty position to the degrading level of humanity, and that for Calvin it is precisely the scale of this 'stooping' which is the glory of the Incarnation. Far from wishing to mitigate the scandal of the idea that

'the spiritual glory of the Word of God' is united in the Incarnation to 'the stinking filth of our flesh', Calvin actually presses the point in his Commentary on John's Gospel. In the same way in *the Institutes*, when he turns to the question of 'how, clothed with our flesh, [Christ] fulfilled the office of Mediator', his first concern is to dismiss the ideas of those who 'fancied' that the flesh of Christ was somehow less than truly human. In the assertions that Christ's body was not a 'mere appearance', and that he was not only 'endowed with heavenly flesh', Calvin addresses himself particularly to the arguments of the Marcionites and the Manichees: for Calvin, Christ was 'true man' - flesh, bones, blood and all.

Calvin recognises that his insistence on this point raises the objection that 'if the Word of God became flesh, then he was confined within the narrow prison of an earthly body'.<sup>12</sup> It is an awareness of the need to meet this objection that drives Calvin to develop what later interpreters have called his *extra Calvinisticum*.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of this feature of Calvin's theology occurs at just this point in the *Institutes*. He writes that to say the Eternal Word of God 'became flesh' does not necessarily imply that the Word of God was *contained* by the flesh.

For even if the Word in his immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that he was confined therein. Here is something marvellous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about the earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning.<sup>14</sup>

The same point is made in the Commentary on John's Gospel:

Since he distinctly attributes the name of the Word of God to the man Christ, it follows that when he became man Christ did not cease to be what He was before and that nothing was changed in that eternal essence of God which assumed flesh. In short, the Son of God began to be man in such a way that He is still that eternal Word who had no beginning.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear from these statements that Calvin understood the Incarnation to

be an accommodation in a second sense: the Word was accommodated to human flesh in such a way that it was not contained or comprehended by the flesh. As Calvin frequently put it, Christ's divinity was to some extent hidden under a veil of the flesh.<sup>16</sup> At an earlier stage it was concluded that the purpose of the *extra Calvinisticum* in Calvin's theology is to establish that the Word made flesh is not a derivative of the essential Word of God, and that both during the period of the humiliation of the Word made flesh (the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ) and after its exaltation, the Word made flesh is one with the Eternal Word of God.<sup>17</sup> In the light of this, it is interesting to note one of the more original elements in Calvin's Christology. At the end of his explanation of the 'unity of the person of the Mediator', Calvin remarks that at some future point the Word of God will lay down that office. On that day,

God will cease to be the head of Christ, for Christ's own deity will shine of itself, although as yet it is covered by a veil.<sup>18</sup>

Here, too, the reference to the veil betrays Calvin's underlying view that the Incarnation is an accommodation of the Word.

Finally, at the end of *Institutes* II.xiii, Calvin turns to the outstanding aspect of the question of how it is possible for God to give himself to be known in the Incarnate Word; namely, how it is possible that 'the two natures of the Mediator make one person'.<sup>19</sup> His own answer is carefully worded in keeping with the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ. He says that

we ought not to understand the statement that 'the Word made flesh' [John 1.14] in the sense that the Word was turned into flesh or confusedly mingled with flesh. Rather, it means that because he chose for himself the Virgin's womb as a temple in which to dwell, he who was the Son of God became the Son of man - not by confusion of substance but by unity of person. For we affirm his divinity so joined and united with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ.<sup>20</sup>

In the Commentary on John's Gospel, Calvin makes himself very clear. With regard to the two natures of Christ, he says

there are two chief articles of belief: First, in Christ two natures in one person in such a way that one and the same Christ is true God and true man. Secondly, the unity of his person does not prevent His natures from remaining distinct, so that the divinity retains whatever is proper to it, and the humanity has likewise separately what belongs to it.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Calvin goes on, the union of the two natures is so complete that it is not always possible to maintain the clear distinction made here between the humanity and the divinity of Christ. Sometimes it is possible to speak instead of a *communicatio idiomatum*.

Thus also the Scriptures speak of Christ: they sometimes attribute to him what must be referred solely to his humanity, and sometimes what belongs uniquely to his divinity; and sometimes what embraces both natures but fits neither alone. And they so earnestly express this union of the two natures that is in Christ as sometimes to interchange them. This figure of speech is called by the ancient writers 'the communication of properties'.<sup>22</sup>

In *Institutes* II. xiv. 2, 3,<sup>23</sup> Calvin, with his customary and impressive familiarity with the Bible, provides a number of examples of the way in which the Scriptures speak 'thus' of Christ. We read, for instance, of Christ saying about himself, "Before Abraham was, I am" [John 8.58]. For Christ to say this was, according to the Reformer, 'far removed from his humanity'. This is an occasion when the Scriptures attribute to Christ 'what belongs uniquely to his divinity'. When, on the other hand, Christ is said to have 'increased in age and wisdom', this surely must be referred solely to his humanity, since 'in so far as he is God, he cannot increase in anything'.

On the basis of his opening remarks in *Institutes* II. xiv. 1,<sup>24</sup> Calvin might have been expected at this stage to illustrate with examples what he means by saying that the Scriptures sometimes attribute to Christ 'what embraces both natures but fits neither alone'. These examples, though, are deferred until II. xiv. 3, because - he says - it is these that 'set forth the true substance of Christ most clearly'.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, in *Institutes* II. xiv. 2, he passes on to examples of the occasions on which the Scriptures

seem to 'interchange' the two natures of Christ. This 'communication of properties':

consists in what Paul says: 'God purchased the church with his blood' [Acts 20.28], and 'the Lord of glory was crucified' [1 Cor. 2.8]. John says the same: 'the Word of Life was handled' [1 John 1.1]. Surely God does not have blood, does not suffer, cannot be touched with hands. But since the Christ, who was true God and also true man, was crucified and shed his blood for us, the things he carried out in his human nature are transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity. Here is a similar example: John teaches that 'God laid down his life for us' [1 John 3.16]. Accordingly, there also a property of humanity is shared with the other nature.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin's point is that the fact that the Scriptures imply this 'communication of properties' underlines the 'earnestness' with which they testify to the unity of the two natures in Christ. In fact it is probably true to say that Calvin draws attention to the *communicatio idiomatum* at this point, because for him the device serves in practise to put beyond doubt the presence of God in the person of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Without a doubt Calvin would accept the contrary point, that the device also serves to put beyond doubt the true presence of Adam in the person of Christ; but it is significant that this is not how he uses the *communicatio idiomatum* in his discussion of Christology in the *Institutes*. Here Calvin takes the importance of the device to be that it 'proves' that God himself was at work in and through the man Jesus Christ. That this is Calvin's reading of the matter is evident from the examples he gives.<sup>28</sup> In all four of these examples, human actions (shedding blood, being crucified or handled, laying down life) are predicated of a divine subject (God, the Lord of glory, the Word of life). All are examples, for Calvin, of the way that God was at work in and through the man Jesus Christ.

It is true that Calvin does give a fifth example, which illustrates the *communicatio idiomatum* working in the opposite direction:

Again, when Christ, still living on earth, said: 'No-one has ascended into heaven but the Son of man who was in heaven' [John 3.16], surely then, as man, in the flesh he had taken upon himself, he was not in heaven. But because the self-same one was both God and man, for the sake of the union of both natures he gave to one what belonged to the

other.<sup>29</sup>

Especially in the light of Calvin's discussion of the Son of man sayings in *Institutes* II.xii.2,<sup>30</sup> it is evident that in this case a divine action is predicated of Christ as a human subject. But this final example has an air of formality about it, as if Calvin felt that he had to show that the Scriptures do employ the *communicatio idiomatum* in this way. This exception does not alter the impression that his real interest lies in those occasions on which the Scriptures 'prove' by the communication of properties that God identifies himself completely with the man Jesus Christ.

It has already been suggested that the reason Calvin delays until *Institutes* II.xiv.3 his examples of the way in which the Scriptures attribute to Christ 'what embraces both natures but belongs to neither alone' is that it is these which 'set forth his true substance most clearly of all'.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly enough, Calvin again underlines those texts of Scripture which indicate that:

The Son of God had been endowed with [divine] prerogatives when he was manifested in the flesh. Even though along with the Father he held them before the creation of the world, it had not been in the same manner or respect, and they could not have been given to a man who was nothing but a man.<sup>32</sup>

Evidently, Calvin is again concerned to emphasise the reality of the presence of God in the person of Christ, who - given his powers - could not have been 'a man who was nothing but a man'. Like Calvin's appeal to the *communicatio idiomatum*, this line of argument has its implications for a study of the principle of accommodation in relation to the Incarnation. As Calvin himself summarises his argument:

The man Christ would not be the mirror of God's inestimable grace unless this dignity had been conferred upon him, that he should both be the only begotten Son of God and be so-called.<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion:**

In *Institutes* II. xii-xiv, Calvin formulates his understanding of the Incarnation, and in particular his understanding of the possibility of the Incarnation, in such a way as to affirm three things. First, his doctrine affirms the gracious initiative of God in stooping to overcome the great distance between the majesty of the Eternal Word and the filth of human flesh. Secondly, it affirms that the Incarnation is a veiling of God, as the *extra Calvinisticum* implies, in that the Word is not contained by the flesh. And lastly, it affirms doubly that the Incarnation is a revelation of God: this is 'proved' by the tendency of Scripture to speak first, of the actions of Christ as the actions of God by the *communicatio idiomatum*, and secondly of powers that belong to God alone being attributed to the man, Jesus Christ.

It remains to be seen how each of these three strands of his thought are developed by Calvin in terms of the principle of accommodation.

**The Relation of the Incarnate Word to God and Calvin's Concept of Accommodation:**

To summarise the discussion so far it will be helpful to return to Calvin's favourite designation for the person of the Mediator: *Deus manifestatus in carne*. In his Commentary on 1 Timothy 3.16, Calvin calls the phrase, 'the most fitting description of Christ's person'. He justifies this opinion as follows:

First, we have here a distinct affirmation of both natures, for he declares Him to be at once true God and true man. Secondly, he takes note of the distinction between the two natures, for he calls Him God and then declares His manifestation on the flesh. And thirdly, he asserts the unity of His Person by declaring that it was one and the same Person who was God and who was manifested in the flesh. In this single phrase the true and orthodox faith is powerfully armed against Arius, Marcion, Nestorius and Eutyches. There is great emphasis laid on the contrast between the two terms, God and the flesh. The difference between God and man is very great, and yet in Christ we see God's infinite glory joined to our polluted flesh so that the two

become one.<sup>34</sup>

In this short extract, Calvin gives an almost definitive account of his understanding of the relationship between the person of the Mediator, and the Godhead: he refers both to the degree of identity, and to the degree of distinction between them. He also returns to that familiar theme: the 'very great' difference between God and man.

Calvin develops all of these themes in terms of the category of accommodation. For Calvin, the Incarnate Word is not only the last Word of God, but the ultimate, most comprehensive self-accommodating act of God.

The Father, himself infinite, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated Himself to our little measure lest our minds be overwhelmed by the immensity of his glory. Fanatics, not reflecting upon this, twist a useful statement into an impious fantasy, as if there were in Christ only a portion of divinity, outflowing from the whole perfection of God. Actually it means nothing else than that God is comprehended in Christ alone.<sup>35</sup>

For Calvin it is ultimately only by the self-accommodation of God in the Incarnation that the 'very great' difference between God and humanity is overcome - and under the same category of accommodation he advances his exposition of the relation of the two natures of Christ. It will be helpful to trace his thought through the same three recurring themes that characterise his treatment of the category of accommodation generally, applying them in particular to the accommodation of God in the Word made flesh. With regard to the Word made flesh, we shall explore first of all 'the initiative of God', then 'the veiling of God', and finally 'the revelation of God'.

#### **1. The Incarnate Word, Accommodation and the Initiative of God:**

Given this 'very great distance' separating God and humanity, how is it possible for God to give himself to be known in his Word? How is it possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken? It is Calvin's assertion that this possibility arises only out of the initiative of God, as he

accommodates himself to human capacity. And for Calvin it is the Incarnation which serves as the ultimate demonstration of this general principle: the Incarnation is the ultimate self-accommodation of God, and it is ultimately only in the Incarnation that this great distance separating God and humanity is overcome. The speaking of the Incarnate Word is the ultimate demonstration of the gracious initiative of God.

At the very least it may be said that the Word made flesh enjoys a priority in the Reformer's thought as the place where God wills to make himself known.

The Father, who is otherwise invisible, has revealed Himself in His Son alone... Because God has given Himself to be enjoyed wholly in Christ, He is elsewhere sought for in vain.<sup>36</sup>

Calvin's writings are full of statements of this kind: God is known only where he wills to be known, and he wills to be known in Christ alone; therefore God is not to be sought outside Christ.

According to Calvin, this is what the Scriptures mean by speaking of Christ as 'the image of God'. A passage from his Commentary on 1 Peter is significant in this respect. Discussing the reasons why it is necessary for Christ to intervene as Mediator, he says:

First, the greatness of the divine glory must be taken into account, and at the same time the littleness of our capacity. Our acuteness is very far from being capable of ascending so high as to comprehend God. Hence all thinking about God without Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts... Let us, therefore, remember that Christ is not called the image of the invisible God in vain, but this name is given to him for this reason, that God cannot be known except in him.<sup>37</sup>

At the very least, then, it is true to say that for Calvin, Christ the image of God is the ultimate accommodation of God to the littleness of human capacity.

Consequently, it may be added that for Calvin, Christ is the ultimate expression of the will and initiative and grace of God. This point is made in the Commentary on Colossians (1.15), where Calvin expands upon the

meaning of the phrase, 'the image of the invisible God'. He has some sympathy, it is clear, with the interpretation offered by the 'old writers', who in their controversy with the Arians emphasised the *ὁμοουσίον* and the equality of the Father with the Son. And yet, he argues, their controversy led them to ignore 'the chief point as to *how* the Father reveals to us the knowledge of Himself in Christ'.<sup>38</sup> It is a question Calvin means to address. How then is it possible for the Father to reveal himself in the Son? Calvin's answer is it is possible by the exertion of the Will of God: in other words, it is possible at the initiative of God. Certainly Christ is of one substance with God, 'for Christ would not truly represent God if He were not the essential Word of God'. But behind the manifestation of the Word in the flesh lies the gracious will of God.

Whatever God has, He has conferred upon His Son...He shows us however at the same time that we must draw from the fulness of Christ all the good we desire for our salvation, because it is the determination of God not to communicate Himself or His gifts to men otherwise than by His Son.<sup>39</sup>

If it is so that God is to be known in Christ alone, it is 'by the determination of God'. Whenever Calvin draws on the biblical tradition of honouring Christ as the image of God, he has this initiative of God in mind.

For God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ's splendour had not beamed upon us. For this purpose the Father laid up with his only begotten Son all that He had to reveal of Himself in Christ, so that Christ, by communicating his Father's benefits, might express the true image of His glory.<sup>40</sup>

For Calvin, the Incarnation amounts to the ultimate manifestation of the initiative of God: it is ultimately only in the Incarnation that the great distance between God and humanity is overcome.

There are hints, however, of a further development of Calvin's thought about the self-accommodation of God, which is associated exclusively with the Incarnation; for whereas it is his general practise to speak of a divine accommodation to human 'littleness' or 'weakness', at times when he

has the Incarnation in mind, Calvin seems to imply a divine accommodation to human sinfulness. This is never explicit, but Calvin's writings do show a tendency in this direction.

For instance, in the passage from the Commentary on 1 Peter cited above, Calvin says that, 'there are two reasons why faith cannot be in God, unless Christ intervenes as a Mediator'. Only one of these is included in that excerpt: namely, that there is a need for God to accommodate himself to human littleness. Now, although Calvin does not continue to use the language of accommodation, it is interesting that the second reason he gives is that there is a need for a Mediator,

who can deliver us from fear, for sin, which reigns in us, renders us hateful to God and Him in turn to us.<sup>41</sup>

The proximity of this idea to the language of accommodation may be significant. Calvin concludes the passage as follows:

It is evident from this that we cannot believe in God except through Christ, in whom God makes himself in a manner little, in order to accommodate himself to our comprehension, and it is Christ alone who can make our consciences at peace, so that we may dare to come in confidence to God.<sup>42</sup>

The same proximity of the language of accommodation in connection with the Incarnation, and the problem of human sin, is present in the Commentary on John 1.14. Attention has already been drawn to the emphasis Calvin gives there to the 'stooping' of the Word of God. This is the language of accommodation. But it is not merely to the 'littleness' of humanity that the Word of God is said to stoop here, but to the 'stinking filth' of human flesh.<sup>43</sup> Here 'the very great distance' to which Calvin refers is not merely the gulf between the glory of the Creator and the littleness of his creation, but that between a glorious and faithful God and a corrupt and faithless humanity.

Calvin takes the Incarnation to be the ultimate self-accommodation of God, because it is ultimately only in Christ that the very great distance

between God and humanity is overcome. It may be ventured that, in Calvin's thought, this is because it is ultimately only in Christ that God has accommodated himself not only to human weakness but also to human 'filth'. At any rate it is certain that according to Calvin, it is ultimately only in Christ that the initiative of God - that is the grace of God - is manifest.

#### ii. The Incarnate Word, Accommodation and the Veiling of God

However much Calvin makes of the advent of the Mediator as the dawning of the ultimate revelation of God, nevertheless he consistently maintains that the knowledge of God which is to be found in his person is not an exhaustive knowledge of God: because the advent of the Mediator is the self-accommodation of God, there is a distinction to be made between the person of the Mediator on the one hand, and God himself on the other. In this way Calvin asserts that even in the speaking of God's Incarnate or last Word, something is held back. Indeed, it is only in the context of the Incarnation that the general principle in Calvin's theology - that in every revelation of God there is a 'veiling' of the divine essence - is actually explicit. For Calvin takes this veiling to be essential to the office of Mediator.

It has already been noted that the *extra Calvinisticum* in Calvin's theology is an assertion that

even if the Word in His immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that He was confined therein.<sup>44</sup>

Rather, the Incarnation of the Word is an accommodation of the Word to human flesh. The advent of the Mediator, according to Calvin, is a humiliation or an 'abasement' of God, in the course of which the divine essence is 'veiled'.

The abasement of the flesh was... like a veil by which His divine majesty was covered.<sup>45</sup>

Although he was God and could have set forth his glory directly to the world, he gave up his right and voluntarily 'emptied himself'. He took the image of a servant, and content with such lowness, allowed his divinity to be hidden by a 'veil of flesh'.<sup>46</sup>

He says that Christ will be such that all men will be shocked at him. He came into the world so as to be everywhere despised; His glory lay hid under the humble form of the flesh; for though a majesty worthy of *the only begotten Son of God* shone forth in Him, yet the greater part of men did not see it, but, on the contrary, they despised that deep abasement which was the veil or covering of his glory.<sup>47</sup>

The implication of these statements - like those we encountered in the context of Calvin's use of the concept of accommodation more generally - is that complete and final as is the manifestation of God in the Word made flesh, it is not a surrender of the initiative of God. Even in this, the ultimate manifestation of God in the flesh, the essence of God is 'veiled'; in fact, here - unlike there - the reference to the veil is explicit. There is not a complete identification of Christ with God, and Calvin is dismissive of those who see no distinction.<sup>48</sup>

This veiling is for 'our sake'; the distinction it implies between the Father and the Son is a concession to human capacity. This is the conclusion Calvin draws from the strand of the Gospel of John which represents Jesus as faithfully carrying out in his ministry the will of his Father. When Jesus 'asserts that the doctrine of His Father is not His', Calvin argues that this assertion is made, not because there is any danger that Jesus might bring any other doctrine, but for our sake.

He is thinking of the capacity of his hearers, who had no higher opinion of him than that He was a man. So by way of concession He lets Himself be reckoned different from His Father, yet so as to bring forward nothing but what He had commanded.<sup>49</sup>

To this extent Calvin's conclusions about the veiling of God in the Incarnation are no more than the culmination of his thoughts about the veiling which occurs whenever God accommodates himself: it is a concession to human capacity.

In the context of the Incarnation, however, the 'veiling' which Calvin

takes to be a consistent feature of the self-accommodation of God, has a further - quite unique - significance. He argues that the veiling of Christ's divinity was essential to his office as Mediator.

We know that the two natures in Christ were so conformed in one Person that each retained what was proper to it: in particular the Divinity was silent and made no assertion of itself whenever it was the business of the human nature to act alone in its own terms in fulfilment of the office of Mediator.<sup>50</sup>

The office of Mediator demanded this degree of identification between the Incarnate Word of God and humanity. If as a result, Christ appears on occasions to be as weak as the humanity he had come to redeem, this ought not to surprise us. Of Christ's anguish in Gethsemane, Calvin writes: :

Nor was it absurd that the Son of God should be troubled like this. For his divinity was hidden, did not put forth its power and, in a sense, rested, that an opportunity might be given for making expiation.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, it is Calvin's conviction that in order for the Mediator to fulfil his office, it was necessary for him to be distinguished from the Godhead, and for his divinity to be veiled. Without this distinction and this veiling there could be no mediation.

### **iii. The Incarnate Word, Accommodation and the Revelation of God:**

Although Calvin understands the office of the Mediator to involve the veiling of his divinity, and although he argues that the Mediator gladly embraced the distinction between himself and the Father, accommodating himself to human capacity in order to fulfil his office, nevertheless it is clear that for Calvin Christ is distinguished from the Father only as a concession to human capacity, made in order that there might be 'an opportunity for making expiation'. This distinction is never a separation. Although in the self-accommodation of God in the Word Incarnate, the glory of Christ was 'concealed', it was not 'lessened'.

Christ indeed could not renounce His divinity; but He kept it concealed for a time, that under the weakness of the flesh it might not be seen. Hence He laid aside His glory in the view of men, not by

lessening it but by concealing it.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, Calvin is alive to the possibility that his emphasis on the veiling involved in this accommodation might be understood as an undermining of the divinity of Christ. He is at pains to make his position clear. Let there be no doubt, he says, that the manifestation of God in the flesh is truly a revelation of God: there is an identity between the Mediator and God, such that it is truly God who is known in the Mediator. Without a doubt, the Mediator is truly God, albeit concealing his divinity under the veil of his flesh. The veil is not to be mistaken for the whole substance of the Word made flesh.

Although He was emptied for a time, yet He kept entire His deity, even if it was hidden under the veil of His flesh.<sup>53</sup>

When we see that by miracles and mighty works, He shows Himself to be the Son of God, it is a seal and proof, that in abasing Himself, He did not leave off His heavenly majesty.<sup>54</sup>

There have been many heretics who have endeavoured to maintain that the majesty and Godhead of Jesus Christ, His heavenly essence, was forthwith changed into flesh and manhood. Thus did some say, with many other cursed blasphemies, that Jesus Christ was made man. What will follow hereupon? God must forego His nature and His spiritual essence must be turned into flesh. They go on further and say that Jesus Christ is no more man, but his flesh has become God. These are marvellous alchemists to make so many new natures of Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, because Christ did retain his divinity when the Word was made flesh, it follows that the knowledge of God which is to be found in him is truly a knowledge of God. It is a mediated, but nonetheless a true knowledge of God. The knowledge of God in the face of Christ is sufficient.

When Christ is called the *image of the invisible God* the reference is not merely to His essence, because He is, as they say, co-essential with the Father, but rather to His relationship to us because He represents the Father to us. The Father is called *invisible* because He Himself is not apprehended by the human mind but shows Himself to us by His Son and thus makes Himself in a manner visible.<sup>56</sup>

What had been hidden in God is revealed in Christ the man, and life, formerly inaccessible, is now close at hand.<sup>57</sup>

The importance Calvin attaches to the positive content of this

manifestation of God in the flesh can be judged by the severity with which he criticises those who reject the revelation disclosed there. There is no other revelation, except the revelation in Christ: those who reject the Word made flesh are without any other source of the knowledge of God.

God is revealed to us in no other way than in Christ. The radiance in the substance of God is so mighty that it hurts our eyes, until it shines on us in Christ. It follows from this that we are blind to the light of God unless it illumines us in Christ. <sup>52</sup>

How disgusting then is the ingratitude of those who despise and even reject Him when He is openly revealed to them! <sup>53</sup>

When he says that *the fulness of the Godhead dwells in Christ*, he means simply that the whole God is found in Him, so that he who is not satisfied with Christ alone, desires something better and more excellent than God. The sum is that God has manifested Himself to us fully and perfectly in Christ. <sup>54</sup>

Evidently, the qualifications Calvin makes about the 'veiling' of God in the Incarnation do not jeopardise the sufficiency of the revelation of God which he insists is to be found there.

#### **Conclusion:**

For Calvin, the possibility of the knowledge of God in the Incarnate Word begins and ends with the grace of God. His understanding of the relationship of the person of the Mediator to the Godhead, is shaped by this sense of the priority, the necessity and the sufficiency of grace. It is the concept of accommodation that enables Calvin to give full weight to this premise in the way he defines the relationship of the person of the Mediator to the Godhead, both in the degree of distinction between the two, and in the degree of identification.

The self-accommodation of God is always at the initiative of God. This is never more true than in the manifestation of God in the flesh, for the initiative of God is required if the very great distance between God and humanity is to be overcome, and ultimately this is done in the Incarnation alone. The initiative of God in the act of accommodation -

which is never surrendered - is a testimony to the priority of grace in the knowledge of God.

The self-accommodation of God is always a veiling of God. This, too, is never more true than in the manifestation of God in the flesh. Indeed, it is in this context that Calvin's language is most explicit. The office of Mediator is such that even - or especially - in this ultimate act of accommodation, there is that which is held back. The essence of God remains hidden, emphasising the continuing dependence of humanity for the knowledge of God, and the necessity of the grace of God.

The self-accommodation of God is always a revelation of God. Quite obviously, this is never more true than in the manifestation of God in the flesh. This ultimate act of accommodation is the ultimate act of revelation: as such it testifies to the sufficiency of the grace of God.

#### NOTES:

- 1 See Chapter 4.
- 2 The question of accommodation and the Incarnation is taken up below, pp. 116-125.
- 3 Comm. Heb. 1. 1, p. 6.
- 4 Comm. Ex. 26. 31, Vol. 2, p. 176. See also: an 'unparalleled mystery', Comm. Is. 7. 14, Vol. 1, p. 249.
- 5 In the context of the Incarnation Calvin is true to his methodological principle that questions about possibility can only be answered in the light of reality. Thus where Christ is concerned, his 'essence' is to be considered only in the light of his 'office' and his 'power' and his 'office'. Comm. John 1. 49, p. 43. See also Comm. Heb. 1. 3, pp. 8-9.
- 6 Comm. John 1. 14, p. 19.
- 7 Inst. I. xiii. x1, p. 135; II. xii. 4, p. 467; II. xiv. 1, p. 482; II. xiv. 8, p. 493.

- 8 Inst. II. xii. 3, p. 466; II. xii. 4, p. 467; II. xii. 7, p. 472; II. xiii. 1, p. 474; *et al.*
- Cf: 'took our flesh': II. xii. 4, p. 468; II. xii. 7, p. 472 and *passim*.  
'assumed our flesh': II. xii. 4, p. 468, and *passim*.
- 9 Comm. 1 Tim. 3. 16, p. 233. This point is noted by Willis: *Christology*, p. 62.
- 10 Comm. John 1. 14, p. 20.
- 11 Inst. II. xiii. 1, p. 474.
- 12 Inst. II. xiii. 4, p. 481.
- 13 See above, pp. 43-44.
- 14 Inst. II. xiii. 4, p. 481.
- 15 Comm. John 1. 14, pp. 20-21.
- 16 See below, pp. 120-122.
- 17 See above, pp. 43-44.
- 18 Inst. II. xiv. 3, p. 486.
- 19 Inst. II. xiv, chapter heading, p. 482.
- 20 Inst. II. xiv. 1, p. 482.
- 21 Comm. John 1. 14, p. 20.
- 22 Inst. II. xiv. 1, pp. 482-483.
- 23 pp. 483-484.
- 24 Inst. II. xiv. 1, pp. 482-483.
- 25 p. 484. This significance of this deferral is not noted in the otherwise excellent account of the *communicatio idiomatum* given in J. N. Tylenda, "Calvin's Understanding of the Communication of Properties," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975-6) pp. 54-65.
- 26 II. xiv. 2, p. 484.
- 27 Willis has a useful discussion of the use to which Calvin puts the *communicatio idiomatum*, in his: *Christology*, pp. 65-67.
- 28 Inst. II. xiv. 2, p. 484.
- 29 Inst. II. xiv. 2, p. 484.
- 30 p. 477.
- 31 Inst. II. xiv. 3, p. 484-485.

- 32 Inst. II. xiv. 3, pp. 484-485.
- 33 Inst. II. xiv. 6, pp. 487-488.
- 34 Comm. 1 Tim. 3. 16, p. 233.
- 35 Inst II. vi. 4, p. 347. Calvin is of course citing Irenaeus here, but with full approval. The fact that this is not an original idea of his own does not mean it was not a central one to Calvin. On the contrary, he most frequently cites the Fathers with approval when he wishes to establish the authority of an idea that is important to him.
- 36 Comm. 1 John 2. 22, p. 260, 261.
- 37 Comm. 1 Pet. 1. 21, p. 250.
- 38 Comm. Col. 1. 15, p. 308; my italics.
- 39 Comm Col 1. 19 p. 311.
- 40 Inst. III. ii. 1, p. 544.
- 41 Comm. 1 Pet. 1. 21, p. 250.
- 42 Comm. 1 Pet. 1. 21, p. 250.
- 43 Comm. John 1. 14, p. 20.
- 44 Inst. II. xiii. 4, p. 481. See above, pp. 43-44.
- 45 Comm. Phil. 2. 7, p. 248.
- 46 Inst. II. xiii. 2, p. 476.
- 47 Comm. Is. 52. 14, Vol. 1, p. 108.
- 48 See for instance the reference to Sabellius, Comm. 1 John 2. 22, p. 259.
- 49 Comm. John 7. 16, pp. 185, 186.
- 50 Comm. Mt. 24. 36, p. 99. See also Comm. Mt. 25. 3, p. 113.
- 51 Comm. John 12. 27, p. 39.
- 52 Comm. Phil. 2. 7, p. 248.
- 53 Comm. Mt 17. 9, p. 203.
- 54 Serm. 1 Tim 3. 16, CO 53. 328; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, p. 18.
- 55 Serm. 1 Tim 3. 16, CO 53. 328; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, p. 16.
- 56 Comm. 2 Cor 4. 4, pp. 55, 56.

- 57 Comm. John 5.27, p.132.
- 58 Comm. Heb. 1.3, p.8.
- 59 Comm. John 8.56, p.234.
- 60 Comm. Col. 2.9, p.331.

- CHAPTER 6 -

ACCOMMODATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SPEAKING OF  
THE WORD OF GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES:

**Introduction:**

Calvin speaks of the second person of the Trinity as the Word of God: in Chapter 4 an attempt has been made to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the Godhead and this Eternal Word. He also speaks of the person of the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Word: in Chapter 5 an attempt has been made to elucidate the nature of Calvin's doctrine of the Incarnation. There is, of course, a third sense in which Calvin speaks of the Word of God: *scripturam esse verbum Dei*.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes Calvin's language seems to make this last identification almost exclusive:

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be 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.<sup>2</sup>

The present chapter seeks to enquire how Calvin considers it is possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken, and for God to give himself to be truly known, in the Scriptures. What does Calvin mean when he says that 'Scripture is the Word of God'? What degree of identity does he intend to imply between the two, and what degree of distinction?

As one might expect, there are parallels to be traced between, on the one hand, Calvin's doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, and on the other, his doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, especially in his use of the principle of accommodation. It is suggested here that his account of the possibility of the speaking of the Word of God in the Scriptures is best understood in the light of these parallels.

However, it is important to register that the parallels that exist between the way Calvin formulates his doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation and the way he expounds a doctrine of the Scriptures are not complete: in two respects in particular there are points of difference to

notice as well as points of agreement.

The first point of difference is that whereas Calvin takes the name 'the Word of God' to belong essentially to both the Eternal Word of God and the Incarnate Word, he contends - as it has been shown in Chapter 3 - that the Scriptures bear this name only derivatively. Thus, whereas Calvin considers that it is possible, even necessary, to speak of a relation of the Substantial Word of God, and indeed of the Incarnate Word, 'to God', he does not suggest that Scripture has this immediate relation. There is no question of Calvin speaking of the Scriptures as 'God' in the way in which he finds himself constrained to speak of the Eternal Word and the person of the Mediator.<sup>3</sup>

The consequence of this is that whereas Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with the nature of the relation of the Eternal Word 'to God', and his doctrine of the Incarnation with the relation of the Mediator 'to God', his doctrine of Scripture serves a different purpose: it is concerned with the nature of the relation of Scripture to 'the Word of God'. And whereas in the earlier cases the principle of accommodation is the means by which Calvin expresses his understanding of the degree of identity and of distinction that exists between the Word of God and the Godhead, in the present context it expresses the degree of identification and distinction Calvin perceives between Scripture and the Word.

The second point of difference is that whereas Calvin devotes space in his *Institutes*, for a distinct and careful exposition of both the doctrine of the Trinity (Book I. xiii) and the doctrine of the Incarnation (Book II. xii-xiv), the same cannot be said of a doctrine of the Scriptures. Calvin's doctrine of the Scriptures, it has been observed, is

frequently characterised... in terms of two principles: first, the presence in Scripture of the Word of God as given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the prophets and the apostles, and, second, the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God by reason of the testimony of the Spirit to the faithful heart.<sup>4</sup>

This is so, and it is even possible to identify the particular parts of the *Institutes* in which these two principles are to be found: 'the presence in Scripture of the Word of God as given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to the prophets and apostles' is defended by Calvin in Book IV. viii; 'the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God by reason of the testimony of the Spirit to the faithful heart' is the theme of Book I. vii-ix. Significantly, however, neither of these passages is essential to the structure of the *Institutes*. In both cases, the discussion about the work of the Spirit in relation to the Scriptures represents a departure from Calvin's main theme.

In Book I. vi, Calvin asserts the necessity of Scripture 'as a guide and teacher for anyone who would come to God the Creator'.<sup>5</sup> His main purpose is to explain the *content* of the Scriptural revelation of God the Creator; but this is delayed until Book I. xff., when Calvin sets out the scriptural witness to 'one God'. In the context of Book I as a whole, chapters vii-ix amount to 'an excursus on biblical authority'.<sup>6</sup>

In Book IV. viii, the chapter heading makes no reference at all to the Scriptures, but indicates Calvin's specific and polemical intention. It is to establish

the power of the church with respect to articles of faith; and how in the Papacy, with unbridled license, the church has been led to corrupt all purity of doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

Calvin's point is that the authority and infallibility claimed by the Roman Church for universal councils, belongs to Christ alone, and - strictly as his interpreters - to the apostles and prophets. It is in order to emphasise the reliability of the apostolic and prophetic testimony to Christ that Calvin appeals to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. However, the conclusion to which Book IV. viii moves is not that Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit - this is assumed - but that 'the power of the church... is not infinite but subject to the Lord's Word, and, as it were,

enclosed within it'.<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that Book IV.viii is irrelevant to the question of how it is that God gives himself to be known in Scripture, but simply to observe that the chapter was not written to answer this question. Thus, because the *Institutes* do not address the subject directly, the account of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture given below differs somewhat from the outlines given in previous chapters of 'Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity' and 'Calvin's doctrine of the Incarnation'.

Nevertheless, important parallels between these doctrines do remain, especially in regard to the place that Calvin gives to the principle of accommodation in his exposition of them. Calvin both answers the question of how it is possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken in Scripture, and clarifies the degree of identity and distinction between them in terms of the self-accommodation of God. The Scriptures are the Word of God as a result of the accommodating initiative of God: God wills to reveal himself in his Word. As the accommodation of the Word, the Scriptures are not to be identified completely with the Word: there is a veiling of the Word of God in the Scriptures. This distinction, however, does not undermine the sufficiency of the knowledge of God which is to be found in the Scriptures.

### **The Relation of the Scriptures to the Word of God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Scriptures.**

Attention has already been drawn to the observation that:

Scholars have frequently characterised Calvin's doctrine of Scripture in terms of two principles: first, the presence in Scripture of the Word of God as given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the prophets and the apostles, and, second, the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God by reason of the testimony of the Spirit to the faithful heart.<sup>29</sup>

In the language of this thesis, what is referred to here is the the work of the Spirit, on the one hand, in the speaking of the Word of God, and on the other, in the hearing of the Word of God. Calvin consistently relates the

Spirit to the Scriptures in these two ways, and seldom speaks of the work of the Spirit in the writers of Scripture without referring also to the Spirit's work in the readers of it. There is a liveliness about the connection between these twin aspects of the Spirit's work in relation to the Scriptures which is characteristic of Calvin's dynamic theology.

Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between these two aspects of the Spirit's work. The position adopted here is that Calvin's doctrine of Scripture concerns only the possibility of the *speaking* of the Word of God: the inspiration of the biblical writers by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, a consideration of *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti*,<sup>10</sup> by which Scripture is heard (i. e.: known to be the Word of God) is deferred until Chapter 9.<sup>11</sup>

Such a procedure has its dangers, though. There is a risk that, as a result of separating these aspects of the Spirit's work, and of concentrating for the present only on the inspiration of the writers of Scripture, the erroneous impression might be created that the Scriptures are in some static way 'the Word of God' for Calvin. Therefore, although it is intended to consider here the speaking of the Word of God - in isolation from the hearing of it - in the Scriptures, it should be kept in mind throughout that Calvin relates these two ideas closely to each other.

This being said, Calvin's answer to the question, 'How is it possible for God to give himself to be known in the Scriptures?' is to point primarily to the work of the Spirit in the writers of the Bible. The conclusion Calvin draws from this aspect of the Spirit's work is that, to all intents and purposes, 'God Himself is the Author of the Scriptures'.<sup>12</sup> It is in this way that Calvin explains the possibility that the Word of God is spoken in the Scriptures: Scripture is the Word of God because it has been spoken at the initiative of God. The theme is a consistent one in Calvin's writings. It is his view that the Scriptures have their origin in

God which underlies Calvin's common practice of insisting that the biblical writers did not compose the Scriptures out of their own imaginations. Rather, Scripture was 'composed under the Holy Spirit's dictation'.<sup>13</sup> The apostles wrote what they did 'with Christ's Spirit in a certain measure dictating the words'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the prophet Daniel 'did not speak from his own discretion, but whatever he uttered was dictated by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>15</sup> For all that it is true that Calvin often takes great care to establish the historical context in which a particular part of the Bible was written, and seeks to understand the intention of the human writer, this underlying view that the biblical writers wrote at the dictation of the Spirit sometimes leads him to be entirely cavalier about such matters. What difference does it make who held the pen when the Scriptures were composed?

Whoever was the penman of the psalm, the Holy Spirit seems, by his mouth, to have dictated a common form of prayer for the Church in her afflictions.<sup>16</sup>

References of this kind to the 'dictation' of the Scriptures to the human authors by the Holy Spirit may be multiplied.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not such statements imply a view of the inerrancy of the biblical text,<sup>18</sup> they certainly reflect Calvin's conviction that the Scriptures come from God; his descriptions of the prophets as *organa Spiritus sancti*<sup>19</sup> and of the apostles as *certi et authentici Spiritus sancti amanuenses*,<sup>20</sup> make the same point. So also does the Reformer's tendency to assert that the Scriptures have come 'from the mouth of God'.

What is Holy Scripture but a declaration of the will of God? And so all that is there contained is as if God opened His sacred mouth to declare to us what he demands.<sup>21</sup>

The Law, the prophets and the Gospel alike have all come from the mouth of God. Moses, for instance,

wrote his five books not only under the guidance of the Spirit of God, but as [if] God Himself had suggested them, speaking to him out of His own mouth.<sup>22</sup>

The office of the priests and teachers under the Old Covenant was similarly 'limited to answering the people from the mouth of God'.<sup>23</sup> And in just the same way, 'God has purposed to speak to us by the apostles... and their lips are the mouth of the one true God'.<sup>24</sup> Their writings are therefore to be considered 'the oracles of God'.<sup>25</sup>

These various strands of Calvin's thought about the origin of the Scriptures are drawn together in his Commentary on 2 Timothy 3.16:

The Law and the prophets are not teachings handed down at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit... Moses and the prophets did not utter rashly and at random what we have received from them, but, speaking by God's impulse, they boldly and fearlessly testified the truth that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke through them... We owe to the Scriptures the same reverence that we owe to God, since it has its only sources in him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it.<sup>26</sup>

On the evidence of this passage alone it would be fair to conclude that according to Calvin, it is possible for the Word of God to be truly spoken in the Scriptures, because the Scriptures have their source in God.

It remains to be seen how Calvin's doctrine of Scripture is related to his concept of accommodation, and how he elucidates the relationship between Scripture and the Word.

### **The Relation of the Scriptures to the Word of God: Calvin's Concept of Accommodation:**

In Book I.viii.13 Calvin identifies Scripture as the Word of God: *scripturam esse verbum Dei*, he writes.<sup>27</sup> Yet there are also expressions in Calvin's writings which imply a distinction between Scripture and the Word: he is capable of saying, for instance, that 'the Word of God is set before us in Scripture',<sup>28</sup> and that we must seek the Word 'in the Holy Scriptures, in which it is contained'.<sup>29</sup> If, then, the statement 'Scripture is the Word of God' is not a simple equation for Calvin, what kind of relation is there in his thought between Scripture and the Word?

**'Scripture is the Word of God': An Analogy with the Sacraments?**

One possibility is that for Calvin, the statement 'Scripture is the Word of God' is analogous to the words of Christ at the Institution of the Lord's Supper: 'This [bread] is my body'. Perhaps when Calvin says that Scripture is the Word of God he is making not a simple equation, but a sacramental one?<sup>30</sup>

There is some substance to this suggestion, in that the Scriptures and the Sacraments are kept in careful balance in the Reformer's theology. Both Scripture and Sacrament have been given by God to his people as the means of grace; and in both, God has accommodated himself to human weakness.

God certainly does accommodate himself to our ignorance to this extent, that He allows us to see Himself after a fashion under figures. For under the Law there were very many symbols to testify to His presence; and today he comes to us by means of baptism and the Supper, and even in the external preaching of the Word.<sup>31</sup>

Scripture and Sacrament alike are the bearers of the presence of God, and there is clearly an implied equivalence in the way in which God gives himself to be known in them.

Let the proud boasters of this world jeer as much as they please since God has graciously condescended to stoop down to us; let us not be ashamed to give this honour to His Word and Sacraments - to behold him there is face to face.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin declares himself entirely content that a view of the Sacraments should be expressed in terms that are appropriate to the Scriptures: 'They will find nothing applicable to the Word which we do not also give to the Sacraments',<sup>33</sup> he says. It is reasonable to enquire whether he also sanctions a view of the Scriptures which is expressed in terms appropriate to the Sacraments, in which the phrase 'Scripture is the Word of God' is taken to be equivalent to the phrase 'This [bread] is my body'. Is the force of what Calvin calls 'the copulative verb'<sup>34</sup> the same in these two contexts?

In the case of the words of Institution, Calvin understands the word 'is' as a figure of speech, a metonymy, by which the sign is referred to as the thing signified. In the Lord's Supper, he argues, bread signifies - and is therefore called - the body of Christ. Calvin offers a parallel from Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians: 'the Rock was Christ', he suggests,

not in a union of nature or substance, but sacramentally. That is why the apostle says that the rock was Christ, for metonymy is very commonly used when speaking about the sacraments.<sup>35</sup>

In the same sense, the bread 'is' the body of Christ: not in a union of nature or substance, but sacramentally. That is not to say that Christ is not truly present in the bread:

The godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there.<sup>36</sup>

Does Calvin mean that the Word of God is present in Scripture in this 'sacramental' sense? So much of Calvin's language about Scripture and Sacrament is parallel that the possibility is not to be dismissed out of hand.

In fact, however, Calvin never does apply the term metonymy to the presence of the Word of God in Scripture, nor ever comes close to suggesting that Scripture is a sign, and the Word of God the thing signified. It is telling that in his explanation of the nature of metonymy, Wallace remarks that 'the word "is" in the words of institution denotes not a relation of identity, such as would hold in the proposition "Christ is the Son of God", but a sacramental union'.<sup>37</sup> His words define the 'sacramental relationship' over against an 'incarnational' one, which begs the question whether the Incarnation might afford a more adequate analogy for the relationship of Scripture to the Word of God.

### 'Scripture is the Word of God': An Analogy with the Incarnation?

The essence of the difference between the sacramental relationship and the incarnational one in Calvin's thought is the way in which Christ is present. His doctrine of the Incarnation implies a presence of God in the man Jesus Christ that is local, but not confined; local, but more than local.<sup>39</sup> His doctrine of the Eucharist, on the other hand, asserts a presence that is by no means local:

We must not dream of such a presence of Christ in the Sacrament as the craftsmen of the Roman court have fashioned - as if the body of Christ, by a local presence, were put there to be touched by the hands, to be chewed by the teeth, and so to be swallowed by the mouth.<sup>40</sup>

The difference is that whereas Calvin affirms that in the Incarnation the divinity of Christ lay hidden 'under' the flesh, he resists absolutely the suggestion that in the Eucharist the presence of Christ is similarly hidden 'under' the bread. Whereas in the context of the Incarnation it is appropriate to speak of the Word dwelling in, or being covered by - and even in this sense being contained in - the flesh, Calvin holds that it is completely inappropriate to say that in the Eucharist the presence of Christ is in any way closed in by or contained in the bread.

We must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper as may neither fasten him to the element of bread, nor enclose him in bread, nor circumscribe him in any way.<sup>41</sup>

And yet Calvin does say that the Word of God is contained by the Scriptures.<sup>41</sup> Some kind of local presence is inevitably implied in a notion of this kind, which seems to rule out an analogy with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And although Calvin asserts that the Word of God is contained in the Scriptures, he surely does not mean that the Word is contained by - or encapsulated by - them: such a thought would run counter to his whole theological enterprise. At this crucial point where the mode of the presence of Christ/the Word is concerned, it would appear that it is more adequate to understand the expression 'Scripture is the

Word of God' by analogy with the Incarnation than by analogy with the Sacraments:

The content of scripture is indeed divine - yet the form in which that content is embodied is human. There is unquestionably an implicit parallel with the Incarnation at this point, as at so many other points in Calvin's thought: divine and human coexist, without compromising or destroying each other. Scripture represents the Word of God mediated through the form of human words, weighted with divine authority on account of their origin.<sup>42</sup>

The analogy of the Incarnation thus sets the limits for a discussion of Scripture as the Word of God in Calvin's theology. Insofar as Calvin understands the Incarnation to be the ultimate accommodation of the Word of God, this analogy also raises the possibility that Calvin defines the degree of identity and of distinction that he takes there to be between Scripture and the Word in terms of accommodation.

#### **The Scriptures, Accommodation, and the Initiative of God:**

In one particular respect, however, the analogy with the Sacraments - despite the priority of the analogy of the Incarnation - still illuminates Calvin's view of the Scriptures: namely in respect of the purpose for which they were given to the Church. That is to say, it is Calvin's remarks about the purpose of the Sacraments as a means of grace accommodated to human weakness which most illuminate his understanding of the purpose of the self-giving of God in the Scriptures. Calvin says that

[God] instituted the sacraments, which we who have experienced them feel to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith. God, therefore, in his wonderful providence accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him.<sup>43</sup>

The point suggested here is that, although he did not express the point so explicitly, Calvin held the same view of the Scriptures. What Calvin *does* say is that when God took the initiative in giving himself to be known in the Scriptures, this was not a random occurrence. Rather, 'where it pleased God to raise up a more visible form of the church, he willed to

have his Word set down and sealed in writing'.<sup>44</sup> The implication is that he did so as an accommodation to human weakness.

It was not in vain then that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself. For because he saw the minds of all men tossed and agitated, after he chose the Jews as his very own flock, he fenced them about that they may not sink into oblivion as others had. With good reason he holds us by the same means in the pure knowledge of himself, since otherwise even those who seem to stand firm before all others would soon melt away.<sup>45</sup>

God has given himself to be known in the Scriptures so as to 'fence about' those whom he pleased to gather to himself, 'because he saw the minds of all men tossed and agitated'. It is a mark of God's singular providence' that, by giving himself to be known in this way, he has 'taken thought for mortals through all ages'.<sup>46</sup>

It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective.<sup>47</sup>

The oracles of the prophets were added to the law, 'because the Lord was pleased to reveal a clearer and fuller doctrine in order better to satisfy weak consciences'.<sup>48</sup> In this way God 'shields his people from all novel doctrines'.<sup>49</sup> 'Consequently, being aware of their own weakness, nothing better is left for them but to keep themselves carefully within the limits of God's Word'.<sup>50</sup>

This last comment speaks volumes for Calvin's view of Scripture as the self-accommodation, or 'Word', of God. In giving himself to be known in the Scriptures, God has accommodated himself to human weakness. The initiative of God is not to be spurned: human beings are to take their own weakness as seriously as God himself has taken it. If it has pleased God to give himself to be known in Scripture, he is not to be sought for outside it.

### The Scriptures, Accommodation, and the Veiling of God:

It is in relation to the veiling of God which takes place in his self-accommodation in Scripture, that it is possible to see the full significance of the analogy of the Incarnation which underlies Calvin's view that 'Scripture is the Word of God'. For it is by analogy with the Incarnation that Calvin distinguishes between Scripture and the Word of God.

There are two ways in which the tendency to draw such a distinction is evident in Calvin's writings. The first follows from his notion that the Word of God is 'contained in' Scripture. Calvin uses a variety of other expressions which demonstrate that his concern is not with the text of Scripture *per se*, but with what Scripture contains. Calvin's usual shorthand for the content of Scripture is the word 'doctrine' (or 'teaching'; *doctrina*). It is a mark of Calvin's consistency that this is the case even on the occasions when he speaks of the dictation of the Scriptures to the apostles by the Holy Spirit. Take for instance, the *locus classicus* - Calvin's comments on 2 Timothy 3.16:

The Law and the prophets are not *teachings* handed down at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

The teaching of Scripture is not quite to be identified with Scripture itself. Thus Calvin will frequently make a comment along the lines that there are 'manifest signs of God speaking in Scripture. From this it is clear that the *teaching* of Scripture is from heaven'.<sup>52</sup> Examples of this kind may be multiplied. It has been suggested that the reason Calvin dwells on the dictation of Scripture by the Spirit is in order to establish that its origin is in heaven; but in fact his concern is not to establish the heavenly origin of Scripture in and for itself. The heavenly origin of Scripture is no more than a guarantee of its teaching.

In order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no-one can

get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture.<sup>53</sup>

This is the significance of Calvin's repeated use of the term 'heavenly doctrine'.<sup>54</sup>

The same feature may be found in association with Calvin's description of the apostles as the 'sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit', whose 'writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God'. Calvin uses these terms to distinguish the apostles from the leaders of the church who succeeded them. Unlike the apostles, 'the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Scriptures.' And what is that? Calvin clearly thinks it is *doctrina*, since he goes on:

We therefore teach that faithful ministers are now not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but that they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception.<sup>55</sup>

Time and again, Calvin's chief concern is not with the text of Scripture *per se*, but with its content, its doctrine.

The second way in which Calvin tends to distinguish between Scripture and the Word of God is by underlining that God gives himself to be known in his Word not as he is in himself, but in a manner accommodated to our weak capacity. Thus the crudity of Scripture functions for Calvin as a parallel to the wretchedness of the flesh to which the Word descended in the Incarnation:

It is a very common fault that men want to be taught subtly and scholastically; and this is why such a large party like lofty and obtruse speculations, and why the most underprize the Gospel, since they do not find the grand language in it to fill their ears. And so they do not deign to give themselves to the study of a common and low doctrine. But how very wicked it is for us to yield less reverence to God's speaking because he lowers himself to our ignorance! Let us know that it is for our sakes that the Lord prattles with us in Scripture in an awkward and common style. Whoever says that he is offended at such meanness or pleads it as an excuse for not subjecting himself to the Word of God is a liar. For he who cannot bear to embrace God when he is near him will certainly not fly to Him above the clouds.<sup>56</sup>

Scripture, it would seem, is the form taken by the Word of God 'when he is

near' to us, 'lowering himself to our ignorance'.

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'liep' in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this, he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>57</sup>

It must be so; if it were otherwise, if God did not accommodate his self-revelation to our capacity, it would not be possible for us to know him.

As it is,

just as men are known by their appearance and speech, so God utters His voice to us by the voice of the prophets, and in the sacraments puts on, as it were, a visible form, from which he can be known according to our small capacity.<sup>58</sup>

For Calvin the, Scripture is the form taken by the Word of God when it is 'sealed' in writing in a manner accommodated to our small capacity. In two ways this view of the Scriptures has practical consequences for Calvin's exegesis.

In the first place, it is by appealing to the principle of accommodation that Calvin is able to justify his belief in the fundamental unity of Scripture. The Reformer argues strongly that the Scriptures testify to a single covenant of grace: it is his concept of the self-accommodation of God in the Scriptures which enables him to reconcile this view with, for instance, the obvious differences between the Old Testament and the New.<sup>59</sup> It is thus no embarrassment to Calvin to concede that the 'Eternal Wisdom' of God 'has not always manifested itself in one way'.<sup>61</sup> The fact that Scripture bears witness to 'this diverse manner of teaching, these great changes of rites and ceremonies' does not mean that God is fickle or inconsistent.

God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodates diverse forms to different ages... as he knew would be expedient for each... If a householder instructs, rules and guides his children in one way in infancy, another in youth, and still another in young manhood, we shall not on this account call him fickle and say that he abandons his purpose... Thus God's constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to all ages... In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show

himself subject to change. Rather he has accommodated himself to man's capacity which is varied and changeable.<sup>62</sup>

That this view of the self-accommodation of God involves a distinction between the text of Scripture and the Word of God is clear from the way in which Calvin employs the principle to explain the rites and ceremonies of the Old Testament's sacrificial system, aspects of which he clearly found distasteful. These were, quite simply, divine accommodations to the rudeness of the ancient people of God. In his Commentary on the Mosaic Harmony, for example, Calvin sometimes draws attention to the way in which God accommodated himself to the hardness of heart of his people: for their sake he 'relaxed the rigour of his justice'<sup>63</sup> and permitted behaviour which 'falls far short of perfection'.<sup>64</sup> This has been characterised as

Calvin's use of the principle of divine accommodation in coming to terms with textual contents that are in his view incompatible with true religion and natural equity as they stand, that require some kind of explanation or qualification lest they be thought to embody the perfect will of God.<sup>65</sup>

Calvin is clearly disconcerted about some aspects of Jewish ceremony, and especially of the Law: at points these seem to him to be at odds with God's self-revelation in Christ. His explanation is as follows:

Those ceremonial practices indeed properly belonged to the doctrine of piety, inasmuch as they kept the church of the Jews in service and reverence to God, and yet could be distinguished from piety itself. In like manner, the form of their judicial laws, although it had no other intent than how best to preserve that very love which is enjoined by God's eternal law, had something distinct from that precept of love.<sup>66</sup>

In this sense the Word of God is distinguished from the text of Scripture: that in his self-revelation in Scripture, God limits and accommodates his Word in deference to the infirmities of his people.

For Calvin there is a second - if related - sense in which the Word of God in Scripture is an accommodated Word. On occasions he suggests that the authors of Scripture accommodated their message to the (mistaken) opinion of their hearers. The most striking example of this can be found

in the Commentary on Genesis. He comments there on the fact that Moses refers to the sun and the moon as the two greatest 'lights'. Calvin himself is familiar enough with the contemporary astronomy to know that in fact the moon is not the next 'greatest' planet after the sun. How is it then that Scripture suggests that it is so? This is an accommodation, he argues, to the 'common sense' of Moses' day.

Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference: Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endowed with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend... Because he was ordained a teacher as well of the learned and rude as of the unlearned, he could not otherwise fulfil his office than by descending to this grosser method of instruction... Since the Spirit of God here opens a common school for all, it is not surprising that he should chiefly choose those subjects which would be intelligible to all. If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage.<sup>67</sup>

This is a fascinating passage: Calvin concedes that the Scriptures do not have the last word in every science. In a similar context he recommends wryly: 'He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere'.<sup>68</sup> It is not the purpose of Scripture to provide detailed information about astronomy. Rather, Scripture is 'a common school', in which the unlearned and the rude, as well as the wise and well-educated, are invited to the knowledge of God. In order that his teaching might be accessible to the uneducated as well as to ingenious men, Moses has adapted his discourse to the common usage, sacrificing a measure of astronomical accuracy in the process. Indeed, Calvin ascribes this sacrifice to the Holy Spirit. The implication is that the truth of God contained in Scripture is an accommodated truth. In Scripture the Word of God is accommodated to common human weakness.

This form of accommodation is not found in the Old Testament only: it

is evident in the writings of the apostles too. For example: commenting on an occasion when the writer to the Hebrews has followed the Septuagint text in a quotation from the Old Testament, Calvin maintains that the writer himself knew that the form of the quotation was not strictly accurate.

Nevertheless,

he does not hesitate to use what was commonly accepted for his purpose. He was writing to Jews, but to Jews, who because of their dispersal among different countries had changed their native language for Greek. We know that the Apostles were not too particular in the matter of adjusting themselves to the ignorant who still had need of milk. <sup>69</sup>

Where it suited their purpose, apparently, the apostles accommodated their teaching to the conventions of the day, even when this involved introducing a measure of inaccuracy into their writings.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Calvin's use of the principle of accommodation in this way amounts to special pleading, as if it were simply an exegetical device to which Calvin resorts when he needs to defend the unity and integrity of the sacred text. His use of the principle is primarily theological, even in these apparently exegetical contexts. The underlying significance of the principle for Calvin is that in his grace God has so accommodated his revelation of himself in the Scriptures that, firstly, it is accessible to all. By grace the self-revelation of God is adapted to the capacity of common humanity. However, while the self-revelation of God in the Scriptures is accessible to all, it is captive to no-one. In the written Word as in the Incarnate Word there is a veiling of God: he gives as much of himself to be known as he wishes. The Word of God is contained in Scripture not in its fullness, but in an accommodated manner. Even the well-educated and the wise are thus thrown back upon the grace of God.

### The Scriptures, Accommodation, and the Revelation of God:

The parallel between Calvin's doctrine of the Incarnation and his doctrine of Scripture may be pressed a little farther: just as Calvin distinguishes but refuses to divide the humanity of Christ from his divinity, so he distinguishes, but does not divide, the Scriptures from the Word of God. In other words, for all that Calvin asserts that the Word of God is contained in Scripture and is not simply to be identified with Scripture, he nonetheless resists any attempt to drive a wedge between Scripture and the Word.

Calvin thus vehemently asserts the sufficiency of the Scriptures for the knowledge of God:

Scripture is the school of the 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.<sup>70</sup>

In the first place there is a 'negative' assertion here about the sufficiency of the Scriptures: 'nothing is omitted from them that is both necessary and useful to know'. In the search for the knowledge of God it is neither necessary nor useful to go beyond the limits of Scripture.

Scripture alone is enough:

Le premier point de la Chrestienté c'est que L'Escriture est toute notre sagesse, et qu'il faut escouter Dieu qui parle là, sans y rien adiouster.<sup>71</sup>

Calvin is inclined to make this negative appeal to the sufficiency of Scripture especially in areas of potential controversy. About predestination, for example, he urges that it should be 'our sacred rule, not to seek to know anything about it except what Scripture teaches'.<sup>72</sup> His disparaging comment about the alleged necessity of the 'sacrament' of Confirmation is well known: 'I thought everything pertaining to Christianity was prescribed and included in the Scriptures'.<sup>73</sup> While it is, as Calvin accepts, 'a very high commendation of Holy Scripture to say that the wisdom which suffices for salvation is not to be found

elsewhere',<sup>74</sup> nevertheless Calvin evidently believes that such a commendation is entirely appropriate.

Secondly, Calvin asserts the sufficiency of Scripture in the more positive sense that 'nothing is taught [in it] but what is expedient to know'. For Calvin, every part of Scripture has some edifying purpose; and no part of Scripture is to be rejected as something separate from the Word of God. Thus he paraphrases the apostle Paul as saying that 'there is nothing... in Scripture which may not contribute to your instruction and the training of your life'.<sup>75</sup> In the same vein is his comment on the phrase 'All Scripture is inspired by God', in 2 Timothy 3.16. To Calvin, the words 'All Scripture' are synonymous with 'the whole of Scripture'.<sup>76</sup>

Presumably the force with which Calvin held this view is reflected in the lengths to which he went to provide a comprehensive commentary on the Scriptures. It does seem likely that Calvin never wrote a commentary on either the book of Revelation or the last two Epistles of John, and at first sight it might appear that his failure to provide an exposition of these books, or for that matter of the Song of Songs, implies that he did not consider these books to 'contain' the Word of God. It is surely no coincidence that of the entire New Testament corpus, only these last three books escaped his commentary. Nor is their position in the canon an adequate explanation of this fact. Calvin did not turn to the books of the New Testament in canonical sequence to expound them, and he may or may not have given his attention to these books if he had lived beyond 1564. It might also be argued that in the introduction to his Commentary on James, there are just the first hints that Calvin operated with a canon within the canon: he confesses there that the writer does seem to him 'rather more reluctant to preach the grace of Christ than an apostle should be'.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps it is the case that Calvin failed to produce a commentary on the Book of Revelation because it seemed to him that the grace of Christ is

still less evident there than in the Epistle of James. After all, it is alleged that he professed not to understand the Apocalypse.<sup>78</sup>

There is, of course, a limit to how far this argument can be taken. For one thing, for all that Calvin might have hoped for better things from the apostle James, the fact remains that he did actually attempt a thorough exposition of what James had written, and set out a justification of its inclusion in the canon. And although he did not write a commentary on the Apocalypse, Calvin did appeal to it often enough as both canonical and authoritative.<sup>79</sup> Similarly in the case of the Song of Songs: although he did not often cite it, let alone lecture or commentate on it, nevertheless he 'judged Castellio unfit to be a minister on the grounds (*inter alia*) that he spoke of it as a lascivious love-poem'.<sup>80</sup> Calvin held that if Scripture appears to be obscure, and if its edifying purpose is difficult to identify, the problem lies not with Scripture, but with the human capacity to comprehend it.

Experience tells us that Scripture is somewhat dark and hard to be understood. This is indeed true, but ought to be ascribed to the dulness and slowness of our apprehension, and not to the Scripture; for blind or weak-sighted men have no right to accuse the sun, because they cannot look at him [*sic*].<sup>81</sup>

For Calvin, in practise as in principle, the whole Bible is the Word of God. For all its lowly and accommodated character, Scripture is entirely sufficient for the knowledge of God:

Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.<sup>82</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

How is it possible for God to give himself to be truly known, and for the Word of God to be truly spoken, in the Word of God? According to Calvin, it is possible by the grace of God. In his providence, God has provided for the weakness of human capacity, in 'sealing' his Word in the

Scriptures. The Scriptures have their origin in the grace and Spirit of God. He is their Author, and the guarantor of their content. For this reason Calvin can say that Scripture is the Word of God.

But the equation between Scripture and the Word of God is not a simple one in Calvin's thought. By analogy with the Incarnation, Calvin holds that in the Scriptures the Word of God is accommodated to human capacity. This implies a real distinction, but not a division, of the divine and human in Scripture. By the lowliness of its form, Scripture veils as well as reveals the Word of God. The Word is contained in, but not contained by, the Scriptures: because of this, humanity cannot usurp the knowledge of God in the Scriptures, but is thrown back in dependence upon the grace of God.

Nevertheless, the self-accommodation of God in the Scriptures is sufficient. Nothing in Scripture is devoid of the power to edify, and nothing essential to the saving knowledge of God is absent from its pages. That saving knowledge of God is mediated by Scripture is a testimony to the sufficiency of God's grace.

#### NOTES:

- 1 Inst. I. viii. 13, p. 92.
- 2 Inst. IV. viii. 8, p. 1155.
- 3 Inst. I. xiii. 7, p. 129: see the discussion in Chapter 3, pp. 64-68.
- 4 R. A. Muller: "The Foundation of Calvin's Theology: Scripture as Revealing God's Word," *Duke Divinity School Review* 44 (1979), p. 16.
- 5 Inst. I. vi. T, p. 69.
- 6 These words are taken from the LCC edition of the *Institutes*, p. 74, n. 2.
- 7 p. 1149.
- 8 Inst. IV. viii. 4, p. 1152.

9 Muller: *Foundation*, p. 16.

10 Although this phrase is a commonplace in the secondary literature (eg.: Dowe, *Knowledge*, p. 11; W. Neuser, "Calvin's Understanding of Holy Scripture" [forthcoming], p. 1; Reid: *Authority*, p. 50) it is surprisingly difficult to locate entire in Calvin's writings. He speaks of the *arcanum testimonium Spiritus* (Inst. I.vii.4, p. 78); the *testimonium Spiritus* (Inst. I.vii.1, p. 74; I.vii.4, p. 78; I.vii.5, p. 80) and the *interiore Spiritus testimonium* (I.vii.4, p. 79). As far as I have been able to establish, the entire phrase *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti* does not occur once in the *Institutes*; nor does it occur in Calvin's comments on 2 Timothy 3.16.

Torrance: *Doctrine of Man* (p.54) appears to give three references for the phrase, but although the concept is present in the passages cited (Comm. Rom. 8.15, Comm. 2 Cor. 1.22, Comm. Gal. 4.6) the phrase is not.

There is however a reference to the *interna operatione Spiritus Sancti* in the Westminster Confession. (Art. I.v) It would be interesting to know if this is the source of what has become the conventional summary of Calvin's theology at this point.

11 See below, pp.213-214.

12 Inst. I.ix.2, pp.94-95; see also Inst. I.xiii.15, p.140.

13 Inst. IV.viii.6, p.1154.

14 Inst. IV.viii.8, p.1155.

15 Comm. Dan. Pref., Vol.1, p.79.

16 Comm. Ps.77 Arg., Vol.3, p.205; see also Comm. Acts 1.20, p.42.

It is worth noting that Calvin takes the 'speaking' of the Spirit in the Scriptures to be continuous. His writings affirm not only that the Spirit has spoken in the Scriptures, but also that he continues to speak in them.

The Holy Spirit prophesies expressly through Paul's lips; Inst. IV.ix.7, p.1170.

The Spirit is accustomed to speak like this in the Scriptures; Comm. Phil. 1.6, p.229.

The Spirit usually speaks this way in the Scriptures; Inst. II.xvi.2, p.504.

The Spirit is wont to say in the Scriptures; Comm. John Arg., p.5.

17 To a paper given at the Fifth Quadrennial International Congress on Calvin Research held at Grand Rapids, Michigan in August 1990, W. Neuser appended a list of 40 examples. The paper will be published in a forthcoming volume entitled *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Doctor*.

18 The two opposing interpretations of Calvin's language of 'dictation' - that he did, and that he did not, mean to imply a belief in an inerrant text of the Bible - are sensibly discussed in B. A. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on

Biblical Authority," in his *The Old Protestant and the New* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1982) ch. 3.

- 19 Inst. IV. viii. 6, p. 1154.
- 20 Inst. IV. viii. 9, p. 1157.
- 21 Cited by Reid: *Authority*, p. 34. The quotation is apparently from Calvin's Sermons on Deuteronomy, but Reid gives no reference to the *Corpus Reformatorum*.
- 22 Comm. Ex. 31. 18, Vol. 3, p. 328.
- 23 Inst. IV. viii. 6, p. 1154.
- 24 Comm. 1 Pet. 1. 25, p. 254.
- 25 Inst. IV. viii. 9, p. 1157.
- 26 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 330.
- 27 *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta* III. 81; Inst. p. 92.
- 28 Inst. I. xiii. 7, p. 129.
- 29 1545 Genevan Catechism; Reid: *Treatises*, p. 130.
- 30 This idea is suggested by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, though not developed there.
- 31 Comm. Acts 7. 40, p. 201.
- 32 CO 8. 427; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 26.

See also

The preaching of the Gospel... and the sacraments... admit us into the presence of God. Comm. Gen. 28. 17, p. 118; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 23.

What is the design of the preaching of the Word [and] the Sacraments... but that we may be united to God? Comm. Ps. 24. 7, Vol. 1, p. 410; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; pp. 22-23. [We] behold the image of God as it is presented to us in the Word, in the Sacraments, in fine in the whole service of the Church. Comm. 1 Cor. 13. 12, p. 281; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 25.

- 33 CO 9. 20-21; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 161.
- 34 Inst. IV. xvii. 22, p. 1387.
- 35 Comm. 1 Cor. 10. 4, p. 205.
- 36 Inst. IV. xvii. 10, p. 1371.
- 37 Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 198.
- 38 See, for example, Inst. II. xiii. 4, p. 481.
- 39 Inst. IV. xvii. 12, p. 1372.

- 40 Inst. IV. xvii. 19, p. 1381.
- 41 1545 Genevan Catechism; Reid: *Treatises*, p. 130; Inst. IV. viii. 8, p. 1155.
- 42 McGrath: *John Calvin*; p. 154.
- 43 Inst. IV. i. 1, p. 1012.
- 44 Inst. IV. viii. 6, p. 1153.
- 45 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 70.
- 46 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 47 Inst. I. vi. 3, p. 72.
- 48 Inst. IV. viii. 6, p. 1154.
- 49 Inst. IV. viii. 6, p. 1154.
- 50 Inst. IV. viii. 11, p. 1160. Similarly, in Inst. IV. viii. 13, p. 1162, Calvin adds that:  
This is the plan of the well-ordered school, that there the teaching of the schoolmaster alone be heard. For this reason, the church should not be wise of itself, should not devise anything of itself, but should set the limit of its own wisdom where Christ has made an end of speaking.  
In his essay *God was Accommodating Himself*, Battles has demonstrated that the teacher-pupil relationship is one of the chief categories within which Calvin seeks to expound the self-accommodation of God.
- 51 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 330; my italics.
- 52 Inst. I. vii. 4, p. 78; my italics.
- 53 Inst. I. vi. 2, p. 72.
- 54 There are countless examples in the *Institutes* alone, from Book I (eg: I. vi. 3, p. 72) to Book IV (eg.: IV. 1. 5, p. 1017).
- 55 Inst. IV. viii. 9, p. 1157.
- 56 Comm. John 3. 12, pp. 70-71.
- 57 Inst. I. xiii. 1, p. 121.
- 58 Inst. I. xvii. 13, p. 227.
- 59 On the continuity of doctrine between the Old Testament and the New, see above, p. 72.
- 60 Comm. John. 5. 37, p. 138. Once again Calvin sets the Scriptures and the Sacraments side by side.
- 61 Inst. IV. viii. 5, pp. 1152-1153.
- 62 Inst. II. xi. 13, pp. 462-463.

- 63 Comm. : Vol. 3, p. 140.
- 64 Comm. : Vol. 3, p. 53.
- 65 Wright: *Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism*; p. 36.
- 66 Inst. IV. xx. 15, p. 1503.
- 67 Comm. Gen. 1. 16; pp. 86-87.
- 68 Comm. Gen. 1. 6; p. 79.
- 69 Comm. Heb. 11. 21, p. 175.
- 70 Inst. III. xxi. 3, p. 924.
- 71 Serm. Dt., 4. 6-10, CO. 26. 131; cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*; p. 99.
- 72 Comm. Rom. 9. 14, p. 203. See also Calvin's comments about the function of angels: Inst. I. xiv. 4, p. 164.
- 73 Inst. IV. xix. 9, p. 1457.
- 74 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 329.
- 75 Comm. Rom. 15. 4, p. 304. See also Inst. I. xviii. 4, p. 237; III. xxi. 3, p. 924.
- 76 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 329.
- 77 Comm. Jam. Introduction., p. 259.
- 78 The third-hand report that Calvin, 'being asked his opinion of the Book of Revelations, replied ingeniously, that he was not able to understand anything in so obscure a writer, whose name and history were not yet settled among the learned' is examined in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (S. C. M. Press, London 1971) p. 77. Parker concludes that the saying is apocryphal and quite out of Calvin's character.
- 79 There are 26 references in the 1559 *Institutes* alone.
- 80 Gerrish: *The Word of God*; p. 63.
- 81 Comm. Is. 45. 19, Vol. 3, p. 421.
- 82 Inst. I. vi. 1, p. 70.

**PART III:  
THE POSSIBILITY OF THE HEARING OF THE WORD OF GOD:**

**Introduction:**

It is Calvin's fundamental premise that true knowledge of God is to be found only in the Word of God. This is the actual character of the knowledge of God. Out of this actuality arises a double question of its possibility: how is it possible for the Word of God to be spoken, and how is it possible for the Word of God to be heard? We have suggested that these epistemological questions relate to what Calvin calls 'the two-fold relation of the Word of God.'

In Part II of this thesis (The Possibility of the Speaking of the Word of God), it was suggested that the question about how the Word of God is spoken is primarily a question about the relation of the Word of God 'to God': how is it possible for the knowledge of God to be given in the Word of God? What is the nature of the relation between God and his Word, such that God is truly able to give himself to be known in the Word? Our conclusion was that Calvin attempts to answer these questions by his use of the category of accommodation.

It is to the question about the hearing of the Word of God that we now turn. This is fundamentally a question about the relation of the Word of God 'to men': what is the capacity of humankind for the knowledge of God? Given that the knowledge of God is actually manifest in the Word of God, how is it possible for humankind to appropriate this knowledge? We shall see that Calvin quite deliberately chooses to articulate his understanding of the hearing of the Word of God, not in terms of a static doctrine of the *imago Dei*, but consistently in terms of the activating power of the Holy Spirit. This is the case, notwithstanding the fact that the Spirit's role is not always referred to explicitly by Calvin. It will be argued here that the work of the Spirit is nevertheless understood by Calvin whenever

he refers, as he frequently does, to the 'dynamic' character of all true knowledge of God.

### **The Inseparable Bond of Word and Spirit:**

It is no less reasonable to boast of the Spirit without the Word than it would be absurd to bring forward the Word without the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

In his 'Reply to Sadolet', Calvin charges his opponent with having 'separated the Holy Spirit from the Word'. The Reformer makes it clear that he considers this 'affront' the source of errors of every kind: how can it be otherwise when the Lord himself has annexed the Spirit and the Word? It is the work of the Spirit, the breath of God, to animate the Word of God. This conjunction of Word and Spirit is certainly a recurring theme in Calvin's own theology: it is the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, who animates the Word of God in Scripture; it is the Holy Spirit who makes the work of the Word Incarnate effective in the life of the believer; and it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that the world is created by the Eternal Word of God, and that Adam in his original integrity is enabled to acknowledge the Creator.

It is this emphasis upon the Holy Spirit, and its close association with the Word of God in Calvin's theology, to which attention will be given here. In the study of the hearing of the Word of God, as in previous sections, the discussion begins with the relation of the Eternal Word of God 'to men' (Chapter 7), and then turns to the relation of the Incarnate Word of God 'to men' (Chapter 8), before finally addressing the relation of the Scriptures to 'men' (Chapter 9). In each case it will be shown that it is the Holy Spirit who makes possible the appropriation of the Word of God by humankind.<sup>3</sup>

**Chapter 7: The Spirit and the Possibility of Hearing the Eternal Word of God:**

There is a discussion among interpreters of Calvin about the capacity of Adam to know God.<sup>4</sup> What does it mean to speak of the creation of Adam in the image of God through the Eternal Word of God? Is a unique capacity for the knowledge of God implied, and if so, is this capacity possessed inalienably by Adam? That is, does this capacity exist as a possibility for Adam, outside the context of a relationship with God? And what is the objective place of the Word of God as it is addressed to humankind? Has Adam an independent capacity to hear the Word? Is this capacity only generated by the speaking of the Word? Is a capacity for hearing the Word of God possible apart from the speaking of the Word?

This is therefore a study of Adam's relation to the Eternal Word of God in his original integrity, and of the creative work of the Holy Spirit.

**Chapter 8: The Spirit and the Possibility of Hearing the Incarnate Word of God:**

What does Calvin have to say about the work of the Spirit in relation to the Incarnate Word of God? What is the objective value of the work of Christ? To what extent is the atoning death of Christ efficacious for fallen Adam apart from Adam's appropriation of it? What is the role of the Spirit in this appropriation of the redeeming work of the Word of God?

This is therefore a study of Adam's relation to the Incarnate Word of God, and of the redemptive work of the Spirit.

**Chapter 9: The Spirit and the Possibility of Hearing of the Word of God in the Scriptures:**

What does Calvin have to say about the work of the Spirit in the animation of the Scriptures? What is the objective value of the Scriptures as the Word of God? In what sense are the Scriptures spoken of as the Word of God, and to what extent do they become the Word of God under the animation of the Spirit? It will be necessary to include material here relating to Calvin's doctrine of the preaching ministry and of the sacraments too.

This is therefore a study of the Adam's relation to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

**NOTES**

- 1 Comm. John 1. 1, p. 7.
- 2 Reply to Sadolet, in Reid: *Treatises*, p. 61
- 3 It is a point of some curiosity why there is no work entitled 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Spirit', among the standard studies in English of Calvin's theology.
- 4 This was the point in dispute in the notorious debate between Barth and Brunner. See P. Fraenkel, *Natural Theology* (Centenary Press, London 1946).

- CHAPTER 7 -

THE SPIRIT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE HEARING OF  
THE ETERNAL WORD OF GOD:

**Introduction:**

With regard to the knowledge of God, the question arises how it is possible for Adam to hear the Eternal Word of God. We take this to be an essentially anthropological question: how is it that Adam is able to appropriate the knowledge of God which God gives of himself in His Word? What is implied about the nature of Adam by the fact that such an appropriation is possible?'

In the first instance, we shall want to give some answer to this question with reference to Adam's creation in the image of God. It is clear that Calvin understands Adam's creation in the *imago Dei* to imply a particular relationship to God. But it will become evident that Calvin did not think of this relationship as a possession held inalienably by Adam, independent of the continuing grace of God. On the contrary, the Reformer held that it is only in being known by God that it is possible for Adam to know God in his Word. The knowledge of God for which Adam is created is the ac-knowledge-ment of God in relationship. And we shall see that, according to Calvin, it is by the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit that Adam is able to acknowledge God.

**The Work of the Holy Spirit according to Calvin:**

In order that, when we come to examine the language Calvin uses to articulate his understanding of Adam's creation in the *imago Dei*, we may recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit as Calvin understands it, it will be worth while to establish before hand the terms Calvin draws upon in his discussions of the Spirit's work.

In a classic statement about 'The Difference of Father, Son and

Spirit', which Calvin makes in the course of an extended discussion of the Trinity, he writes:

To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and well-spring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.<sup>2</sup>

These two words, 'power' and 'efficacy' are characteristic of Calvin's writings about the Holy Spirit. In the *Institutes* I. xiii. 22 we find what amounts to a one-phrase summary of the Spirit's work as Calvin understands it, when he writes: the Spirit is 'the essential power of God'.<sup>3</sup> The same understanding of the Spirit's work is expressed in greater detail in

*Institutes* I. xiii. 14:

It is the Spirit who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and on earth. Because he is circumscribed by no limits, he is excepted from the category of creatures; but in transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life and movement, he is plainly divine. Again, if regeneration into incorruptible life is higher and much more excellent than any present growth, what ought we to think of him from whose power it proceeds? Now, Scripture teaches in many places that he is the author of regeneration not by borrowing but by his very own energy... Thus through him we come into communion with God, so that we in a way feel his life-giving power toward us.<sup>4</sup>

A second 'classic' statement by Calvin, which discloses a great deal about his understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, is found in the 1536 Edition of the *Institutes*, in the exposition of the Creed. There Calvin writes:

There is no grace from God, save through the Holy Spirit. Grace is itself the power and action of the Spirit: through grace God the Father, in the Son, accomplishes whatever good there is; through grace He justifies, sanctifies, and cleanses us, calls and draws us to Himself.<sup>5</sup>

This is a passage to which we shall want to return. The equation of grace with the work of the Spirit, and the necessity of grace for any good thing is the fundamental premise behind the content of this section.

Words such as these - 'sustaining' 'quickening', 'energy', 'life', 'movement', 'growth', 'power', 'efficacy', 'communion' - are clearly

theologically evocative terms for Calvin. He draws on them again and again to express his understanding of the Spirit's work, and when he uses them it is frequently the case that he has the work of the Spirit in mind, even if the Spirit is not under discussion explicitly.

It is the presence of these terms which demonstrates that the work of the Holy Spirit is crucial to Calvin's exposition of the possibility of Adam's hearing of the Eternal Word of God. Although the identification is not one Calvin usually makes explicit, we may confidently identify the Holy Spirit as the source of the activity in which Adam acknowledges God. We shall see that when Calvin speaks of Adam's creation in the image of God, and his capacity to know God in the Word of God, he also speaks of an enlivening, quickening power by which, in the act of acknowledging God, Adam is conformed to the Word of God. From discussions of the work of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's writings such as these we have cited, it is evident that the enlivening, quickening power to which the Reformer refers in his account of Adam's capacity to know God is without doubt the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### **The Creation of Adam in the Image of God:**

At an early stage in the *Institutes*, Calvin embarks upon a 'Discussion of Human Nature as Created, of the Faculties of the Soul, of the Image of God, of Free Will, and of the Original Integrity of Man's Nature'.<sup>6</sup> In the course of this discussion, he faces the following question: in what does Adam's creation in the image of God consist? His own answer is that

The likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures. Accordingly, the integrity with which Adam was endowed was expressed by this word, when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker.<sup>7</sup>

Two features of Calvin's answer to that question are worthy of closer

attention. In the first place, it is noteworthy that Calvin draws attention to 'the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures', including, for example, right understanding and reason. It is possible, as it will be made clear below, to set beside this passage others in which Calvin identifies in a similar way the faculties and capacities by which Adam is set apart from the rest of the living creatures. It is clear that the particular faculties to which Calvin repeatedly refers betray a good deal about his understanding of the knowledge of God.

But secondly, and ultimately decisively, Calvin draws attention to the way in which, in his created integrity, Adam 'truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker'. This is a striking and highly significant statement. It suggests that, in the end, Calvin is dissatisfied with the attempt to identify what it means to speak of Adam's creation in the *imago Dei* in static terms, by the enumeration of particular faculties and abilities he possesses. He is constrained to speak instead, or at least additionally, of the recognition by Adam of his Maker. Calvin's words suggest that he understood Adam's creation in the image of God to consist, ultimately, not in a possession but in an act.

The conclusion towards which this piece moves is that the single sentence examined above is truly characteristic of Calvin's understanding of Adam's creation in the image of God: that according to Calvin Adam's creation in the image of God consists, not simply in particular faculties and capacities which distinguish Adam from all other living creatures (such as reason and understanding, or even the possession of a soul), but in a relationship of acknowledgement and dependence upon the Creator. The point will also be made that it is the Spirit of God who activates this relationship and sustains this dependence.

The argument proceeds in four stages:<sup>29</sup>

1. In his created integrity, Adam is especially endowed to hear the Word of God. Adam is set apart from all other creatures by the possession of certain faculties and abilities. Pre-eminent among these is the capacity for wisdom and knowledge. At times Calvin's language appears to suggest that it is in the possession of these capacities that Adam's creation in the image of God consists.

2. But in fact this is not the case. Adam derives no automatic benefit from these faculties. Indeed, left to himself Adam is utterly misled by these faculties: his knowledge and wisdom are a liability and not an asset to him, for they lead him away from God rather than towards him. This is original idolatry.

3. In truth, it is not in a static capacity to know God, but in a dynamic knowing of God - an acknowledgement of God - that Adam exists in the image of God. It is possible for Adam to hear the Word of God because he is created in the image of God: but this possibility does not exist apart from its actuality. It is in hearing the Word of God that Adam lives in the image of God.

4. It is the Spirit who activates and sustains this acknowledgement of God, and therefore the Spirit who makes possible the hearing of the Word of God.

The remainder of this chapter is a development of these stages of the argument. Each stage will be addressed in its turn, and an assessment made of its place within Calvin's thought.

1. In his created integrity, Adam is especially endowed to hear the Word of God. Adam is set apart from all other creatures by the possession of certain faculties and abilities. Pre-eminent among these is the capacity for wisdom and knowledge. At times Calvin's language appears to suggest

that it is in the possession of these capacities that Adam's creation in the image of God consists.

It is important to distinguish at this point two recurring features of Calvin's discussions of Adam in his original integrity: his capacity for knowledge in general and his capacity for the knowledge of God in particular.<sup>9</sup> These two are, of course, related: but they are not to be confused.

Calvin does repeatedly draw attention to the faculties and abilities which distinguish Adam from all other living creatures. Among these, the capacities relating to Adam's rational nature are paramount: his reason, intelligence, understanding, and so on. In this respect, the single sentence already cited from the *Institutes* (I. xv. 3) is typical: but this passage may be supported by many others. In his commentary on the phrase '*The life was the light of men*', for instance, in John 1. 4, he writes:

I think that this is a reference to that part of life in which men surpass the other animate creatures. It is as if he were saying that the life given to men was not life in general but life united with the light of reason.<sup>10</sup>

Similar passages can be are not difficult to find:

Therefore by this word [the image of God] the perfection of our whole nature is designated, as it appeared when Adam was endued with right judgment, had affections in harmony with reason, had all his senses sound and well-regulated, and truly excelled in everything good.<sup>11</sup>

I say that life is superior in men, because not only do they have sensation and movement in common with the brute beasts, but they are endowed with reason and intelligence.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: We see among all mankind that reason is proper to our nature; it distinguishes us from brute beasts, just as they by possessing feeling differ from inanimate things.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis placed by Calvin on Adam's rational nature is clear, and significant. It is certainly the case that, according to Calvin, these faculties (reason, intelligence and so on) are 'proper' to Adam's nature. It is an inescapable conclusion from what Calvin calls the relation of the Word of God 'to men', that Adam was created in a peculiar sense 'wordable'.

We may also say that these faculties are essential to Adam's creation in the *imago Dei*, and that they are (*a fortiori*) essential also to the nature of God: Calvin's stress upon Adam's rational nature betrays the profound sense of the rationality of God which pervades all his theological writings.

But it is not Calvin's suggestion that the possession of these faculties in themselves should be understood as the end, or even the essence, of Adam's creation in the image of God. It may be the case that Adam's rational nature is a consequence of his creation in the image of God; but it does not follow that these faculties are given to Adam simply to distinguish him from the brute beasts, or that Adam exists in the image of God merely by his possession of them. Rather, and this is the second point Calvin repeatedly makes, these faculties by which Adam is distinguished from all other living creatures are given to him as the means to an end: in order that he might know God. Calvin makes this point explicitly in the Introductory Argument to his Commentary on Genesis:

For this is the argument of the Book: After the world was created, man was placed as in a theatre, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author. Secondly that all things were ordained for the use of man, that he, being under a deeper obligation, might devote and dedicate himself entirely to obedience towards God. Thirdly, that he was endued with understanding and reason, that being distinguished from brute animals he might meditate on a better life, and might even tend directly towards God, whose image he bore engraven on his own person.<sup>14</sup>

Or, in a similar vein, this passage from the *Institutes* might be cited:

In order that the great nobility of our race (which distinguishes us from brute beasts) may not be buried beneath our own dullness of wit, it behoves us to recognize that we have been endowed with reason and understanding so that, by leading a holy and upright life, we may press on to the appointed goal of blessed immortality.<sup>15</sup>

The point to be established here is that even when Calvin's primary reference is to the faculties by which Adam is distinguished from the other living creatures, he does not suggest that Calvin's creation in the *imago Dei* consists simply in the possession of them. Rather, he is created in

the image of God in order that he might know God, and it is to this end that these faculties are given to him. As Torrance expresses it:

In contrast to all other earthly creatures, man has been endowed with intelligence that he may have a special and familiar relation to God through the Word.<sup>16</sup>

To summarise the discussion so far: it is Calvin's usual practise, when he discusses the creation of Adam in the image of God, to draw attention to the rational nature of Adam by which he is distinguished from other living creatures. But Adam has this rational nature only as a means to an end: in order that he might know God.<sup>17</sup> It is for the knowledge of God that Adam is created in the image of God.

Now, it is self-evident that, in his created integrity, reason and intelligence were possessed inalienably by Adam. The question arises therefore, whether the inalienable possession of these faculties amounted to the inalienable possession of a capacity to know God. At times Calvin's language seems almost to suggest that this was so:

Man in his first condition excelled in these pre-eminent endowment, so that his reason, understanding, prudence and judgment, not only sufficed for the direction of his earthly life, but by them men also mounted up even to God and eternal bliss.<sup>18</sup>

Calvin seems almost to suggest that, given his possession of a rational nature, Adam is able to know God at will.

In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life.<sup>19</sup>

The suggestion appears to be that the knowledge of God depends upon the will of man. If Adam wills to know God, he is able to do so because of his (inalienable) creation in the image of God.

2. But in fact this is not the case. Adam is able to derive no automatic benefit from these faculties. Indeed, left to himself Adam is utterly misled by these faculties: his knowledge and wisdom are a liability and not

an asset to him, for they lead him away from God rather than towards him. This is original idolatry.

When he is engaged in a discussion of Adam's creation in the image of God, Calvin's habit is to employ exalted language and to write with great passion: it is clearly a matter of some importance to him to establish that Adam is the crown of all creation (a veritable micro-cosmos: a world in himself), and a creature of considerable glory:

We must now speak of the creation of man:... because among all God's works here is the noblest and most remarkable example of his justice, wisdom and goodness.<sup>20</sup>

Alone of all God's creatures, it is Adam who has a rational nature, and who is created to know God. At times, as if unconsciously carried away in enthusiasm for his subject, Calvin seems to imply that this capacity for the knowledge of God belongs to Adam inalienably. The extent to which Calvin actually means to imply this is a matter of debate among his interpreters:<sup>21</sup> What '*Wörtmächtigkeit*' has Adam, in his original integrity? How can the finite have a capacity for the infinite? Does Calvin mean to imply that Adam's capacity for reason and for words amounts also to a capacity for the Word, and for the knowledge of God in the Word? And if this is not Calvin's implication, what does his language mean?

In order to frame an answer to these questions it will be helpful to call to mind a consistent didactic purpose reiterated by Calvin throughout the *Institutes*, especially in his discussions of anthropology. Assessing the claim made by theology upon those who study it, Calvin comments:

Here, then, is what God's truth requires us to seek in examining ourselves: it requires the kind of knowledge that will strip us of all confidence in our own ability, deprive us of all occasion for boasting, and lead us to submission. We ought to keep this rule if we wish to reach the true goal of both wisdom and action... Thus even with no outside support the utterly vain opinion generally obtains credence that man is abundantly sufficient of himself to lead a good and blessed life.<sup>22</sup>

The exalted language Calvin employs when he wishes to describe Adam

'in his first condition' must be read in this light. When he exalts Adam as the crown of the creation, as especially endowed to hear the Word of God, as possessing reason and intelligence, as created in order that he might know God, Calvin has a particular didactic purpose, which is to glorify God by extolling the splendour of his creation.

Adam, as a creature of the Living God, is indeed a gifted creature. But in himself, he is nothing. The glory that belongs to Adam, belongs to him precisely as a creature of the Living God; it does not belong to him for what he is in himself. Thus even when he is concerned with Adam as originally created, Calvin shies away from any definition of the *imago Dei* which implies that so much as a single particle of credit belongs to Adam. Examples of his thought on the subject are not difficult to find:

[Adam's creation in] the image of God is incomparably the highest nobility; and lest men should use it as an occasion of pride, their first origin is placed before them; whence they may learn that this advantage was adventitious; for Moses relates that man had been, in the beginning dust of the earth. Let foolish men now go and boast of the excellency of their nature!<sup>23</sup>

Man cannot arrogate anything, however minute, to himself without robbing God of His honour.<sup>24</sup>

Whenever this lust [to usurp God's honour by losing ourselves in vain self-confidence] invades our mind to compel us to seek out something of our own that reposes in ourselves rather than in God, let us know that this thought is suggested by no other counsellor than him who induced our first parents to want to become "like gods, knowing good and evil."<sup>25</sup>

Knowledge of ourselves lies first in considering what we were given at creation and how generously God continues his favour towards us, in order to know how great our natural excellence would be if only it had remained unblemished; yet at the same time to bear in mind that there is in us nothing of our own, but that we hold on sufferance whatever God has bestowed on us. Hence we are ever dependent on him.<sup>26</sup>

This last quotation is particularly significant. As much in his discussion of Adam's creation in the image of God, as in every other area of his theology, it is Calvin's constant insistence that 'we are ever dependent upon [God]'. The clear implication for our present discussion is that, in-dependent of God, the capacities Adam has (his reason and his

intelligence) are not sufficient to lead him to the knowledge of God. On the contrary, exercised independent of God, these faculties serve to lead Adam away from God and not towards Him. This is, at least, what we would expect to find Calvin saying, and such is in fact the case.

And this was the original source of idolatry, that men supposed they could not otherwise possess God unless by subjecting Him to their own imagination. Nothing however can be more preposterous; for, since the minds of men and all their senses sink far below the loftiness of God, when they try to bring Him down to the measure of their own weak capacity, they travesty Him. In a word, whatever man's reason conceives of Him is mere falsehood; nevertheless this depraved longing can hardly be repressed, so fiercely does it burst out.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin's point is that, even given his remarkable faculties, finite Adam remains utterly dependent upon the grace of God for the knowledge of God. Without the downward motion of grace, there is no possibility of the finite comprehending the infinite.

The first approach to proper knowledge of God is this, if we go out of ourselves and do not measure Him by our own mental capacity, and, what is more, do not form any mental images of Him according to our carnal understanding, but set Him above the world, and distinguish Him from created things.<sup>28</sup>

We must lift up our minds higher than our natural understanding mounts. But shall a man ever attain unto God, if he judge according to his own fancy and fleshly reason? No. But we shall rather darken His glory. So then, if we would glorify God, let us learn to reach out our knowledge far and wide. And how? For a man shall never reach out his knowledge as he ought to do, to speak of God, except that he know that His majesty is higher than his understanding, and therefore that He must come down to us and lift us up to Him.<sup>29</sup>

Outside the grace of God, Adam's noble faculties, his reason and his intelligence mislead him, for they tempt him to fashion God in his [Adam's] image, inverting the proper relation of God and man. It is a real possibility for Adam to receive no benefit at all from the faculties which distinguish him from the brute beasts. Unless Adam pays homage to God, and acknowledges his dependence upon his Creator, the faculties which were intended to lead him to God are defiled.

Let us consider that God's making of us so excellent as to have His image imprinted in us, was for no other purpose than that we should do Him homage for His precious gifts, and by that means be the more moved to love Him, and to keep ourselves from defiling such gifts as reason,

will, discretion, and all the other powers of our souls which He has given to us.<sup>30</sup>

3. In truth, it is not in a static capacity to know God, but in a dynamic knowing of God - an acknowledgement of God - that Adam exists in the image of God. It is possible for Adam to hear the Word of God because he is created in the image of God: but this possibility does not exist apart from its actuality. It is in hearing the Word of God that Adam lives in the image of God.

It is fair to say, therefore, that, according to Calvin, Adam's creation in the image of God does not consist in the possession of particular faculties such as his reason and his intelligence, or even in the possession of the capacity for which these faculties are given him, namely the capacity for the knowledge of God. Rather, Adam's creation in the *imago Dei* consists in the right exercise these faculties: that is, in the actual knowing (the acknowledgement) of God. Adam reflects the image of God, not in having the capacity to know God, but in actually knowing him. To use Calvin's words, Adam is in the likeness of God when:

'he truly refers his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker.'<sup>31</sup>

This point is made most clearly by Calvin in his commentary on Genesis. On Gen. 2.9, he writes:

[God] intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives, not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone; and that life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds from God.<sup>32</sup>

Later in the same passage, Calvin comments that Adam:

could not otherwise retain [life] than by acknowledging that it was received from [God].<sup>33</sup>

That is, the image of God in man is in no way a static reflection of

the being of God, but a dynamic reflecting of it, sustained from moment to moment by the grace of God. As such it cannot be thought of as a natural heritage which can be handed on from by Adam from generation to generation. To put the same point another way: the image of God in man is grounded continually in the will, not of man, but of God. This was always so, even for Adam in his original integrity. In a passage in his Commentary on Genesis (3.22), Calvin speaks of the Tree of Life in these terms:

It is indeed certain that man would not have been able, had he even devoured the whole tree, to enjoy life against the will of God; but God, out of respect to his own institution, connects life with the external sign till the promise should be taken away from it; for there never was any intrinsic efficacy in the tree; but God made it life-giving, so far as he had sealed His grace to man in the use of it, as, in truth, he represents nothing to us with false signs, but always speaks to us, as they say, with effect.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding his creation in the image of God, we may put into the mouth of Adam words Calvin has put into the mouth of Job:

This is not my own, I have this not of myself; my possessing of it is only because He lends it to me.<sup>35</sup>

Torrance expresses the point as follows:

The whole being and life of man continues to hang on the gracious will and decision of God from moment to moment. Man lives and moves and has his being in the unceasing visitation of the presence of God, and in the constant and continuous repetition of His pure grace. That is to say, Calvin thinks of man's being only in a dynamic relation to God, or rather only in a dynamic relation from God to man.<sup>36</sup>

**4. It is the Spirit who activates and sustains this acknowledgement of God, and therefore the Spirit who makes possible the hearing of the Word of God, for it is the Spirit of God who is the dynamic agent in the relationship between God and man.**

It remains to be shown that the effective agent of this relationship between God and man as originally created is the Holy Spirit. On a small number of occasions Calvin makes this connection explicitly, and puts the

question beyond doubt. However, it can also be established that a sense of the activity of the Spirit is consistently behind Calvin's understanding of the hearing of the Word of God, even when it is not explicitly identified. That it is to say, it is evident that the language Calvin uses to give an account of Adam's creation in the image of God is full of allusions to the work of the Spirit, so that the Spirit is very much present in the discussion, by nature if not by name.

There are a small number of occasions on which Calvin explicitly identifies the Spirit as the agent of the knowledge of God to which Adam was called by his creation in the image of God. On one such occasion, Calvin makes the point positively, if incidentally, when he comments that:

Although [Adam] was formed after the image of God... he was not content to be so far enlightened in the knowledge of things by God's Spirit as was expedient for his welfare, but would needs become like unto God.<sup>37</sup>

The point is clearly, if inadvertently made, that Adam ought to have been content with that enlightenment by the Spirit of God as was expedient for one formed after the image of God. Even in his created integrity, Adam was dependent upon this enlightenment for the knowledge of God. On another occasion the point is made negatively, and more broadly:

We continue to live so long as He sustains us by His power; but no sooner does He withdraw His life-giving Spirit than we die.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin makes this point generally, but it can certainly be applied specifically to the condition of Adam, created in the *imago Dei*. As much before he fell as afterwards, Adam lives in the *imago Dei* in continuous dependence upon the life-giving Spirit of God.

The same principle is set out in the following excerpt from a Sermon on Job, only on this occasion there is no explicit reference to the Spirit: the Spirit's activity is to be inferred.

When God sets us in a good state, yet we cannot continue unless He have His hand continually stretched out over us. What is to be done then, that we may continue in that state wherein we are established? God must breathe his power into us without ceasing and be continually

at hand with us.<sup>39</sup>

Although passages in Calvin's writings which explicitly identify the Holy Spirit as the agent of the relationship in which Adam knows his Creator are relatively few, this last quotation indicates that the Spirit's work may be assumed by the Reformer in his discussions of this subject even when not explicitly named. It is frequently the case that when Calvin speaks of the knowledge of God to which Adam is called by his creation in the image of God, he draws heavily on a theological vocabulary which indicates the activity of the Holy Spirit. We have suggested that words such as 'energy' and 'power', 'life' and 'light', 'communion' and 'participation', are theologically evocative for Calvin,<sup>40</sup> and it may be assumed that they are deliberately employed by him in this context.

It is also the case that the particular construal placed by Calvin on the concept of grace in this context betrays the underlying activity of the Holy Spirit, as the language adopted by Calvin to express his understanding of Adam's creation in God's image demonstrates. In *Institutes* I. xv, Calvin argues that 'the true nature of the image of God is to be derived from what Scripture says of its renewal through Christ'. And he goes on to observe that:

when Paul discusses the restoration of the image, it is clear that we should infer from his words that man is made to conform to God not by an inflowing of substance, but by the *grace* and *power* of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

Calvin clearly means us to infer from this as it is in the restoration of the image, so it was in the original creation: even in his original integrity, Adam was made to conform to God not by anything inherent, but by the grace and power of the Spirit. This theme is one to which Calvin returns. In a Sermon on Job, for instance, he argues that the image of God is not something that belongs to us. The thrust of the argument is not that it once belonged inalienably to Adam, but is now lost to us. It is that then, as now, the image of God is ours as a gift:

Have we it through our own effort? Have we it by inheritance from our ancestors? No. But we have it of God's free gift through his own mere goodness.<sup>42</sup>

The point to notice here is that Calvin polarises 'our effort' and 'God's goodness'. In doing so, he betrays a highly active view of grace: for Calvin grace is not a state of affairs. The implication is that it is by the Spirit of God that we are conformed to the image of God: for it is not by our own effort, but by the gracious gift of God; it is not by our own power but by the power of God. We find the same polarisation in Calvin's Commentary on Genesis 2. 9:

[God] intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives, not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone; and that life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds from God.<sup>43</sup>

It is a fair inference to suppose that whenever he speaks of Adam's dependence upon the grace of God, Calvin is invoking the work of the Spirit of God. There is in any case a strong *a priori* argument that this must be so: to what else can 'grace' refer (the grace on which Adam depends for his existence in the image of God) if not to the Holy Spirit? It is in this light that phrases like the following are to be understood:

The reiterated mention of the image of God is not a vain repetition. For it is a remarkable instance of the Divine goodness which can never be sufficiently proclaimed.<sup>44</sup>

Or again:

By this particular title [the image of God] Moses rightly commends God's grace toward us.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar way, other recurring words and phrases imply the work of the Holy Spirit in making efficacious for Adam the benefits of his creation in God's image. As a general rule, as it was suggested in the introduction to this chapter, it is to the Spirit that Calvin attributes the work of establishing communion between God and man. It is, he writes, 'through him that we come into communion with God.'<sup>46</sup> It may be inferred that it was so

for Adam. In fact, Calvin tells us so: 'I admit, he says, that Adam bore God's image, in so far as he was joined to God.'<sup>47</sup> Created to know God, he had no automatic communion with God. He was not free to establish communication with God at his own pleasure. On the contrary, he was dependent upon God, and upon the work of the Spirit. Certainly Adam enjoyed a position of great privilege by virtue of his creation in God's image. But:

At that time, I say, when he had been advanced to the highest degree of honour, Scripture attributed nothing else to him than that he had been created in the image of God, thus suggesting that man was blessed, not because of his own good actions, but by participation in God.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore,

There is nothing in which man excels the lower animals unless it be a spiritual communion with God.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, in the end Adam cannot boast of his inalienable possessions, his reason or his intelligence, for instance, as if these things in themselves distinguished him from the lower animals. Only communion with God does that, and that is the work of the Spirit alone.

#### **Conclusion:**

In *Institutes* II.ii.20, Calvin addresses directly the question of how it is possible for Adam to hear the Word of God. 'What kind of hearing is this?', he asks. His own answer is as follows:

Surely [it is a kind of hearing] where the Spirit by a wonderful and singular power forms our ears to hear and our minds to understand.<sup>50</sup>

This is without doubt 'a settled principle' for Calvin. It is always the Spirit whose energy forms the ear to hear. This is so not only in the knowledge of God which comes from regeneration (the need for which Calvin is seeking to demonstrate when he uses these words at that particular point of the *Institutes*), but also true of Adam in the *imago Dei*. The hearing of the Word of God is always made possible only by the energy of the Spirit of

God. Without the activity of the Spirit, the Word of God is impenetrable to Adam, even in his created integrity.

#### NOTES

- 1 It will be evident that throughout this section a heavy debt is owed to Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*.
- 2 Inst. I. xiii. 18, pp. 142, 143 my italics. This statement moves in a direction contrary to that adopted by Osterhaven whose exposition of Calvin attributes 'the ordered disposition of all things' to the Spirit rather than the Son. But perhaps this indicates not so much that Osterhaven is mistaken, as that many of Calvin's theological themes are interrelated, and cannot be defined too narrowly. See M. E. Osterhaven, "John Calvin: Order and the Holy Spirit," *Reformed Review* 32 (1978-79) pp. 23-44.
- 3 Inst. I. xiii. 22, p. 148.
- 4 Inst. I. xiii. 14, p. 138, 139.
- 5 1536 Inst., p. 57.
- 6 I. xv, p. 183.
- 7 Inst. I. xv. 3, p. 188.
- 8 The argument proceeds according to a pattern that will be repeated in the ensuing discussions of the Spirit's work in regeneration and sanctification. Here the attempt is made initially to identify the objective work of the Word of God in the creation of Adam: at a later stage we shall want to ask the same question about the work of the Word of God in both regeneration and sanctification. Next, we seek to establish what benefits are derived automatically by Adam from his creation in the image of God: at a later stage we shall want to ask the same question about the work of the Word of God in relation to the atoning work of the Mediator and the sanctifying work of the Scriptures. Finally, an attempt is made to assess the role of the Spirit in making it possible for Adam to hear the word of God in his created integrity: at a later stage we shall want to ask the same question about the work of the Spirit in making the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Word of God efficacious for Adam.
- 9 Calvin distinguishes in the *Institutes* (II. 11. 12, p. 270) between natural gifts and supernatural gifts, which are appropriate respectively for general knowledge, and for the knowledge of God.
- 10 Comm. John 1. 4, p. 11.
- 11 Comm. Gen. 1. 26, p. 95.
- 12 Comm. Acts 17. 28, p. 120.

- 13 Inst. II.ii.17, p.276.
  - 14 Comm. Gen. Arg., p.65.
  - 15 Inst. II.i.1, p.242. Compare this sentence from a Sermon on Job: Adam 'was created after the image of God to be enlightened in all truth' (cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*, p.78).
  - 16 Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p.23.
  - 17 Inst. I.iii.3, p.46: All men are born and live to the end that they may know God.
  - 18 Inst. I.xv.8, p.195.
  - 19 Inst. I.xv.8, p.195.
  - 20 Inst. I.xv.1, p.183.
  - 21 The most notorious example is the Barth-Brunner controversy, on which see Fraenkel: *Natural Theology*.
  - 22 Inst. II.i.2, p.242,243. Although this quotation is taken from Bk. II, when Calvin is discussing the implications of Adam's fall, the principle is one on which he draws consistently. Indeed, it might almost be said to be a fundamental principle for Calvin.
  - 23 Comm. Gen. 2.7, p.111.
  - 24 Inst. II.ii.1, p.255.
  - 25 Inst. II.ii.10, pp.267, 268.
  - 26 Inst. II.i.1, p.242.
  - 27 Comm. Ex. 32.1, Vol.3, p.330.
  - 28 Comm. Acts 17.24, p.113; see also Inst. III.ii.14, p.559.
  - 29 Serm. Job 13.1f., cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p.130.
  - 30 Serm. Dt. 6.4ff, cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p.24.
  - 31 Inst. I.xv.3, p.188.
  - 32 Comm. Gen. 2.9; p.117.
  - 33 Comm. Gen. 2.9; p.117.
- See also Comm. Ps. 96.10: What more monstrous disorder can be conceived of than exists where the Creator is not acknowledged? Cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p.49.
- 34 Comm. Gen. 3.22; p.184. Note that Calvin allows 'intrinsic efficacy' to God alone. Here it is denied to the Tree of Life. It might equally be denied to Adam's capacity for the knowledge of God.
  - 35 Serm. Job. 7.7f; cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p.18.

- 36 Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p. 61.
- 37 Sermon. Job 28. 10f; cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p. 56.
- 38 Comm. Ps. 104. 29, Vol. 4, p. 167.
- 39 Sermon. Job 10. 7f; cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p. 62.
- 40 See above, pp. 159.
- 41 Inst. I. xv. 5, pp. 191-192.
- 42 Sermon. Job 33. 1ff; cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p. 56.
- 43 Comm. Gen 2. 9; p. 117.
- 44 Comm. Gen 1. 27; p. 96.
- 45 Inst. I. xv. 3, p. 188.
- 46 Inst. I. xiii. 14, p. 139.
- 47 Inst. II. xii. 6, p. 471.
- 48 Inst. II. ii. 1, p. 256.
- 49 Calvin's Tracts, Eng. Trans. Vol. 1, p. 34; cited by Torrance: *Doctrine of Man*; p. 54.
- 50 Inst. II. ii. 20; p. 279.

- CHAPTER 8 -

THE SPIRIT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE HEARING OF  
THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD.

**Introduction:**

If, as it has been argued above, it was only possible for Adam to hear the Word of God by a constant dependence upon the Holy Spirit even in his created integrity, this is all the more the case for Adam after his Fall. In the case of the Incarnate Word, however, we shall see that Calvin is much more explicit about the role of the Holy Spirit in forming Adam to hear and appropriate the Word.

The exploration of The Actuality of the Knowledge of God in Part I of this thesis has indicated what great stress Calvin places on the redemption of the world by the Incarnate Word: fallen Adam is redeemed by the Word made flesh, and is lost without the Redeemer.<sup>1</sup> This is the subject to which almost the whole of Book II of the *Institutes* is devoted. Our present concern is for the content of *Institutes* Book III - where Calvin turns his attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in making redemption efficacious for Adam - and with the relationship of Book III to Book II. The attempt is made here to elucidate - to borrow Calvin's words - 'the way in which we receive the grace of Christ: what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow.' A number of questions arise from a study of the redeeming work of the Word made flesh, which should be addressed at this point. Chief among them is the question whether the redemption achieved by the Word is automatically and universally efficacious for Adam, and if not, how it is that Adam comes to an appropriation of it.

The form of this chapter will follow that of the previous one,<sup>2</sup> in which an examination was made of the work of the Spirit in relation to the knowledge of God in creation. It was established there that Adam, created by the Word of God for the knowledge of God, finds this knowledge only in

peculiar relation to the Word of God, and that this relation is animated constantly by the Holy Spirit. Initially attention was drawn to those elements in Calvin's account of Adam's creation in the image of God which seemed to imply that Adam's capacity for the knowledge of God was inherent (1). It was then possible to see that this is in fact very far from the truth, as Calvin perceives it (2), and that Calvin's insight is rather that Adam lives in the image of God only in so far as he remains in constant dependence upon the Word of God (3), which is only possible by the gracious activity of the Holy Spirit (4). Adam comes to the knowledge of God in creation only by hearing the Word of God; and this possibility of hearing the Word of God arises for Adam solely out of the work of God, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

A similar account may be given of the hearing of the Word of God in redemption; that is, of the appropriation of the redeeming work of the Word of God. Once again, the argument proceeds by four stages:

1. The work of the Incarnate Word is to redeem fallen Adam and to restore him to the knowledge of God. There are elements of Calvin's theology which seem to imply that what the Word of God achieved by way of redemption is automatically efficacious for all humankind.

2. But this is in fact not the case. Fallen humanity gains no automatic benefit by the death and resurrection of the Incarnate Word. Calvin speaks time and again of the danger that the atonement and all its benefits may be useless to us and without effect.

3. It is only by faith that fallen humanity is able to appropriate the work of the Incarnate Word. Thus fallen human beings are constantly dependent upon God for the hearing of the redeeming Word.

4. It is the Holy Spirit alone who activates this faith. Thus it is through the Spirit alone that the redemption accomplished by the Word of God is made effective for fallen Adam, and through the Spirit alone that

fallen Adam is formed to hear the Incarnate Word of God. Calvin refers to two aspects of the Spirit's work: he speaks of the work of the Spirit as bringing Adam to a participation in Christ; and distinctly (but not separately) of the Spirit's work as bringing to Adam an illumination of Christ. In the first instance, by the agency of the Spirit, Adam is brought to a participation in Christ; in the second, by the agency of the same Spirit, a knowledge and understanding of this work is brought to him. In Calvin's understanding of the Spirit's work, these aspects may be distinguished, but not separated.

The remainder of this section is a development of these stages of the argument. We shall dwell on each in turn, and consider its place within Calvin's thought.

**1. The work of the Incarnate Word is to redeem fallen Adam and to restore him to the knowledge of God. There are elements of Calvin's theology which seem to imply that what the Word of God achieved by way of redemption is automatically efficacious for all humankind.**

Initially, then, it will be helpful to consider the scope of the atoning work of the Word of God as Calvin articulates it. It is important to note here that Calvin's treatment of the redeeming work of the Word of God is parallel to his treatment of the scope of the creating work of the Word of God. The kind of statements Calvin makes of the Word of God in connection with creation have their parallels in what he says of the Word of God in regard to redemption. In particular, just as in his account of the creation of Adam in the *imago Dei*, Calvin at times appears to suggest that what was achieved by the Word of God in creation belonged to Adam universally and inalienably, so in his account of the redemption of Adam and the restoration of the *imago Dei*, Calvin's statements at times have a

similarly universal and inalienable sense.

The degree to which this is so has been largely obscured by the traditional Calvinistic formulation of the doctrine of a limited atonement, which has dominated the interpretation of Calvin's theology at this point since at least the early Seventeenth Century. As a result of the Arminian/Calvinist controversy of the late Sixteenth and early Seventeenth Centuries, it has become difficult to study Calvin's doctrine of the atonement except in the context of the doctrine as it was articulated by his successors in the Calvinist tradition.<sup>3</sup> Studies which relate Calvin's understanding of the atonement to the rest of his own theology are few and far between. The purpose of this section will be to draw out the parallel that exists between the creative and the redeeming works of the Word of God, and in this way to relate what Calvin has to say about the atonement to the rest of his own theological thought.

When Calvin's writings are allowed to speak for themselves, what emerges is the considerable number of unguarded statements Calvin makes about the atonement which are indefinite, limitless and universal in character. That is to say, a significant number of the statements made by Calvin about the atonement, even if it is felt that they do not amount to a commitment on the Reformer's part to a doctrine of universal atonement, are certainly the sort of unqualified remarks that post-Dordrecht Calvinists, defending a doctrine of the atonement which was definite, limited and particular in scope, found it consistently impossible to make.

As Daniel observes, these statements 'can be found in all sorts of [Calvin's] writings (The *Institutes*, Sermons, Tracts, Commentaries etc) and over a long space of time'.<sup>4</sup> The statements Calvin makes are of the following kinds: first, those which speak of Christ as the Redeemer/Saviour of the whole world; secondly, those which speak of Christ as the Redeemer/Saviour of all humanity; and thirdly, those which speak (inclusively rather

than exclusively) of Christ's death as 'for us'. It may be suggested that in all these cases Calvin is constrained to speak this way by his concept of Christ as the 'Second Adam', who came to restore lost humanity to the *imago Dei*.

#### **i. Christ the Redeemer/Saviour of the World:**

When [the evangelist] says 'the sin of the world', he extends this kindness indiscriminately to the whole human race, that the Jews might not think the Redeemer has been sent to them alone.<sup>5</sup>

God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world.<sup>6</sup>

This redemption was procured by 'the blood of Christ', for by the sacrifice of his death all the sins of the world have been expiated.<sup>7</sup>

He must be the Redeemer of the world. He must be condemned, indeed, not for having preached the gospel, but for us He must be oppressed... He was there, as it were, in the person of all cursed ones and all transgressors... He was there... in our name... He forgot himself in order to acquit us before God... It was all one to suffer the shames and disgraces of the world, provided that our sins be abolished and we be absolved from our condemnation.<sup>8</sup>

#### **ii. Christ the Redeemer/Saviour of Humanity:**

For to what purpose was Christ sanctified by the Father, if not to free men from the devil's tyranny and overthrow his kingdom?<sup>9</sup>

The hour was approaching when the Lord Jesus Christ would have to suffer for the redemption of mankind.<sup>10</sup>

According to His wonderful wisdom and goodness, He ordained that Christ should be the Redeemer, who would deliver the lost race of man from ruin.<sup>11</sup>

*'This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many':* The word '*many*' does not mean a part of the world only, but the whole human race.<sup>12</sup>

By taking away the sins of the world by the sacrifice of His death, [Christ] reconciles men to God.<sup>13</sup>

#### **iii. Calvin's use of the First Person Plural:**

Very often found in association with these two categories of

statements made by Calvin with reference to the atonement is a third; namely, his use of the first person plural. This is a consistent feature of the Reformer's writings, although it is one which has attracted curiously little attention in discussions of his thought or his style. Examples of it may be found almost at will throughout the *Institutes*, the *Commentaries*, the *Sermons* and the *Tracts*. The style might almost be said to be Calvin's characteristic way of 'doing theology' in general, and of speaking of the death of Christ in particular. For Calvin, all theology is a meditation on what God is 'for us'; above all, the meaning of Christ's death is that it was 'for us'. Almost invariably, what concerns Calvin in his theological writings is how God relates to 'us', and 'we' to him. To take a sustained example:

With regard to our corrupt nature and the wicked life that follows, all of us surely displease God, and are guilty in his sight, and are born to the damnation of Hell. But because the Lord wills not to lose what is his in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love. However much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures. However much we have brought death upon ourselves, yet he has created us unto life. Thus he is moved by a pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace. Since there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness, so long as we remain sinners he cannot receive us completely. Therefore, to take away all enmity and to reconcile us completely to himself, he wipes out all evil in us by the expiation set forth in Christ; that we who were previously unclean and impure, may show ourselves righteous and holy in his sight. Therefore, by his love God the Father goes before us and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

When Calvin employs the first person plural in this way, of whom is he speaking? According to Nicole, 'those to whom Calvin refers by such pronouns are not merely members of the human race, but are most commonly those who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior.' This judgement is probably accurate, in the strictest sense - but it is also misleading.

It is not Calvin's primary purpose to define the group for whom Christ died, in an exclusive sense, as if 'for us' were a way of expressing 'only for the elect', 'only for the church', 'only for the believer' or 'only for

the Christian'. On the contrary, when Calvin employs the first person plural in this way, he does so inclusively, referring to himself and his fellow believers (a group coterminous with the elect, it is true) as *members of the new humanity*, in whom the *imago Dei* is restored.

For example, when Calvin refers in this passage to 'our corrupt nature' he surely has in mind the corrupt nature common to all humanity, and which is ours in Adam; and when he remarks that 'all of us surely displease God', it is evident, again, that he is speaking of all those who are in Adam, all humanity. The same universality is intended by the statements which immediately follow, when Calvin writes that, 'the Lord wills not to lose that which is his in us', and that, 'however much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures', and that, 'he has created us unto life'.

If this is so, what are we to make of the statements about our reconciliation to God, with which the extensive paragraph we have cited concludes? When Calvin writes that, '[God] wipes out all evil in us', and that, 'by his love, God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ', is a similarly universal reference intended? There is no contrary indication in the text. The structure of the *Institutes*, with its progression from the creation to the redemption of Adam, suggests that, at this point too, Calvin's language has this inclusive sense: by 'us' Calvin means 'the new humanity inclusively' not 'the elect exclusively'.

Calvin speaks here, and throughout the *Institutes*, with the self-knowledge of one who is known by God: he speaks as Adam was created to speak. The 'us' - among whom Calvin includes himself, and for whom Christ died - is the new Adam, created and now redeemed by God through his Word. Thus Calvin asserts that:

The meaning of the whole passage is that since Christ surpasses Adam, the sin of Adam is overcome by the righteousness of Christ. The curse

of Adam is overturned by the grace of Christ, and the life which Christ bestows swallows up the death which came from Adam.<sup>15</sup>

A passage from the *Institutes* strikes a similar note:

I should like to know why Paul calls Christ the "Second Adam", unless the human condition was ordained for him, in order that he might lift Adam's descendants out of ruin... But Paul, calling Christ the "Second Adam", sets the Fall, from which rose the necessity of restoring nature to its former condition, between man's first origin and the restoration that we obtain through Christ.<sup>16</sup>

This notion of the redemption of Adam is an essential aspect of Calvin's thought on the subject of the atonement: it was by the Word of God that Adam was created, and it was for Adam's redemption that the Word became flesh and died. Because of this, Calvin's language at times does suggest that the redemption won by Christ is automatically and universally efficacious for fallen humanity. He can go as far as to say:

The death of Christ is universally efficacious for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>17</sup>

**2. But this is in fact not the case. Fallen humanity gains no automatic benefit by the death and resurrection of the Incarnate Word. Calvin speaks time and again of the danger that the atonement and all its benefits may be useless to us and without effect.**

In fact Calvin did not hold that the redemption accomplished by the Word of God was universally and automatically efficacious for Adam. Indeed, he branded all those who argued that it was so 'fanatics', and voiced his own opinion that the idea of a universal salvation was 'monstrous'. He makes the point in a comment upon 1 John 2.1-2, in which Jesus Christ is described as 'the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world.' What does it mean, Calvin asks, to say that 'the sins of the world have been expiated'?

I pass over the dreams of the fanatics, who make this a reason to extend salvation to all the reprobate and even to Satan himself. Such

a monstrous idea is not worth refuting.<sup>18</sup>

To Calvin it is clear that,

Although Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all, yet not all receive him.<sup>19</sup>

It is not enough to regard Christ as having died for the salvation of the world. Each man must claim the effect and possession of this grace for himself personally.<sup>20</sup>

Sentiments of this kind are as much a part of Calvin's thought on the subject of the atonement as his statements about its unlimited scope. The offer of salvation may be universal, and the redeeming purpose of the Word of God may be universal, but the fact of salvation/redemption itself is not. According to Calvin, there is a very real danger that what the Word of God achieved by way of atonement will remain fruitless and without benefit for fallen Adam.

We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely this combination of elements in Calvin's thought which brings him to Book III, Chapter 1 in his *Institutes*<sup>22</sup>: if the death of Christ is universal in its scope, but not all are saved, 'how do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son - not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?'<sup>23</sup> As Calvin himself puts it, 'we must now examine this question.'

**3. It is only by faith that fallen humanity is able to appropriate the work of the Incarnate Word. Thus fallen human beings are constantly dependent upon God for the hearing of the redeeming Word.**

What then distinguishes those who do benefit from Christ's saving work, from those who do not? How is it possible for Adam to appropriate the redeeming work of the Word of God? Calvin's answer to these questions

forms Book III of the *Institutes*, especially Chapters 1-3. We shall see that his own conclusion is that Adam appropriates this salvation by faith, an entirely passive condition, which amounts to a dependence by Adam upon the mercy of God. According to Calvin, this dependence is animated by the Holy Spirit.

In his account of the reason why some do not benefit from the death of Christ, Calvin attributes their exclusion to their unbelief:

It is of course certain that not all enjoy the fruits of Christ's death, but this happens because their unbelief hinders them.<sup>24</sup>

The point is expressed negatively here: those who are not saved are not saved because of their unbelief. But Calvin makes the point positively too: those who are saved, are saved by faith.

Now it may be asked how men receive the salvation offered to them by God. I reply, by faith.<sup>25</sup>

In short, if we partake of Christ, in Him we shall possess all the heavenly treasure and gifts of the Holy Spirit, which lead us into life and salvation. Except with a true and living faith, we will never grasp this. With it, we will recognise all our good to be in him, ourselves to be nothing without Him; we will hold as certain that in him we become God's children and heirs of the heavenly kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

This participation in Christ can only be grasped 'with a true and living faith'. But what is the nature of saving faith? Calvin knows that very much depends upon what is meant by 'faith'. For anyone can say that we are 'saved by faith', and yet 'understand nothing deeper than a common assent to the gospel history.'<sup>27</sup>

We ought to examine what this faith ought to be like, through which those adopted by God as his children come to possess the heavenly kingdom... and we must scrutinize and investigate the true character of faith with great care and zeal because many are dangerously deluded today in this respect.<sup>28</sup>

Now, Calvin's conclusions about 'the true character of faith' have been scrutinized and investigated with almost as much care and zeal as the Reformer himself brought to bear on the subject. Moreover, substantial areas of disagreement have emerged among his interpreters.<sup>29</sup> However, at

the risk of some oversimplification, it may be said that, as Calvin understands it, faith is particularly passive. In this regard we find a clear parallel between Adam's appropriation of the creative work of the Word of God, which was his only by complete and constant dependence upon God, and his appropriation of the redemptive work of the Word of God, which is his in the same manner.

Calvin's formal definition of faith runs as follows:

We hold faith to be a knowledge of God's will toward us, perceived from his Word.<sup>30</sup>

Or, more fully:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded on the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, but revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

It will be necessary to return in due course to the important place Calvin gives to knowledge in these definitions. But in the first instance, it is important simply to see that for Calvin the fundamental characteristic of faith is that it is directed to the benevolent will of God. It is this feature which gives Calvin's understanding of faith its thoroughly passive nature. As he himself explains:

We make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly rests... Faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.<sup>32</sup>

There can be no firm condition of faith unless it rests upon God's mercy.<sup>33</sup>

According to Calvin, then, it belongs to the essence of faith to rest and rely: faith consists in dependence, and in particular in dependence upon the steadfast grace of God.

For, as regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God's favour, but receiving from Christ that which we lack.<sup>34</sup>

Now faith brings nothing to God. On the contrary, it sets man before God, empty and poor, that he may be filled with Christ and his grace. It is therefore a passive work, so to say, to which no reward can be paid.<sup>35</sup>

Thus [Paul] denies that man himself initiates faith, and not satisfied with this, he adds that it is a manifestation of God's power.<sup>36</sup>

As Kendall remarks,

What stands out in [Calvin's] descriptions is the given, intellectual, passive and assuring nature of faith. What is absent is the need for gathering faith, voluntarism, faith as man's act, and faith that must await experimental knowledge to verify its presence.<sup>37</sup>

This kind of language is all very reminiscent of the language Calvin uses to express his understanding of Adam's creation in the image of God. Just as we found that in his original integrity Adam depended entirely upon God for his creation in the *imago Dei*, we now find that a similar dependence upon God is required of Adam for his restoration to the *imago Dei*. The parallel between the way in which Adam was able to appropriate the creative work of the Word of God and the way in which he is also able to appropriate the redemptive work of the Word of God is particularly striking here. For instance, in his interpretation of the attitude of 'the just' who 'shall live by faith', in his Commentary on Habbakuk, Calvin could almost be speaking of Adam in his original righteousness:

What does the just do? He brings nothing before God except faith: then he brings nothing of his own, because faith borrows, as it were, through favour, what is not in man's possession. He, then, who lives by faith, has no life in himself; but because he wants it, he flies for it to God alone.<sup>38</sup>

**4. It is the Holy Spirit alone who activates this faith. Thus it is through the Spirit alone that the redemption accomplished by the Word of God is made effective for fallen Adam, and through the Spirit alone that fallen Adam is formed to hear the Incarnate Word of God.**

The implication of this kind of language is that 'faith' in Calvin's understanding, 'is not a human possibility'<sup>39</sup>. Calvin's exposition of faith as a passive dependence upon God, and the care he takes to circumscribe the role of the human will in relation to faith, emphasise

that he understood faith to be a possibility for Adam only by divine grace. It remains for us to show that passive dependence upon God, by which alone redemption is a possibility for Adam, is animated constantly by the Holy Spirit, here in the context of redemption, as it was in Adam's creation in the *imago Dei*.

In fact it is not difficult to show that this is the case: Calvin states the matter quite clearly on a number of occasions. As salvation is by faith alone, so faith is the work of the Spirit alone:

The only true faith is that which the Holy Spirit seals on our hearts.<sup>40</sup>

Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

[The Spirit is] the Inner teacher, by whose agency the promise of salvation, which would otherwise only strike the air or our ears, penetrates into our minds.<sup>42</sup>

But it is appropriate that we should 'enquire into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits',<sup>43</sup> in order to see how Calvin develops his understanding of the Spirit's work. How is it that the benefits of Christ's death become ours 'by faith'?

Calvin distinguishes two aspects of the hearing of the Word of God in redemption, which we shall call 'participation' and 'illumination'. In *Institutes* III.11.35, he writes:

To sum up: Christ when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every good.<sup>44</sup>

Calvin distinguishes here between the work of the Spirit by which a believer comes to a participation in Christ, and that work (also of the Spirit) by which the believer comes to a knowledge of this participation. It is specifically the latter work to which Calvin gives the name 'faith'. But he is careful to make the point that these two works of the Spirit occur 'at the same time'. They may be distinguished, but they are not separate works; that is, they are never found separately, but always occur

together. They are the twin aspects of the single work of the Spirit in the believer, by which the individual comes to an appropriation of the redeeming work of the Word of God.

**i. The Holy Spirit and Participation:**

The first aspect of the Spirit's work by which the believer is brought to an appropriation of the death of Christ, is that by which the believer is united to Christ. There can be no redemption without this bond.

To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.<sup>45</sup>

How then can there be saving faith except in so far as it engrafts us in the Body of Christ?<sup>46</sup>

Until our minds become intent on the Spirit, Christ so to speak, lies idle, because we contemplate him as outside ourselves - indeed far from us... This union alone insures that, as far as we are concerned he has not come unprofitably as our Saviour... But he unites himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him.<sup>47</sup>

It is important to realise that this participation is not equivalent with faith, as Calvin interprets it: it is a corollary of faith.

We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us... For, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow up into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith.<sup>48</sup>

This participation of the believer in Christ is not 'faith'; it is obtained by faith. But although it may be distinguished from the aspect of the Spirit's work by which we have faith, nevertheless it is always present wherever there is faith. It is a necessary part of the work of the Spirit by which a believer comes to an appropriation of salvation; but it is also the aspect of the Spirit's work which Calvin treats most briefly in Book III of the *Institutes*. Although this participation with Christ effected by the Spirit has a significant place in Calvin's thought, so that he is

careful to mention it whenever he discusses the work of the Spirit in relation to redemption, nevertheless it is clear from the distribution of the material in *Institutes* Book III that when Calvin has this subject in mind, it is the Spirit's work of illumination which dominates his thoughts. It is in the illumination of the mind that faith consists, in Calvin's exposition.

#### ii. The Spirit's work of Illumination:

If Adam is to come to an appropriation of the redemption achieved by the Word of God, it is necessary for him to receive the illumination of the Holy Spirit; for,

Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin makes the same point more positively. When the Holy Spirit effects faith in the individual, this is, as it were, an illumination of the mind.

Therefore, as we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the Spirit of God, so when we are drawn, we are lifted up in mind and heart above our understanding. For the soul, illumined by him, takes on a new keenness, as it were, to contemplate the heavenly mysteries, whose splendour had previously blinded it. And man's understanding, thus beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit, then at last truly begins to taste those things which belong to the Kingdom of God, having previously been quite foolish and dull in tasting them.<sup>50</sup>

The significance of the priority Calvin gives to this illuminating power of the Spirit is related to the emphasis on knowledge which pervades his theology. For Calvin, the expression, 'saved by faith' amounts to 'saved by knowledge'<sup>51</sup>: indeed, he says so quite bluntly, more than once.

We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the Church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of enquiring and knowing. But we do so when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of the reconciliation effected through Christ... by this knowledge... do we obtain entry to the kingdom of heaven.<sup>52</sup>

Faith consists in the knowledge of God and of Christ.<sup>53</sup>

Faith consists not in ignorance, but in knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

We hold faith to be a knowledge of God's will toward us, perceived from his Word. <sup>55</sup>

However, it should not be thought that Calvin considers faith to be purely cognitive, and that the illumination of the Spirit of which he speaks consists simply in the imparting of information. The knowledge to which Calvin refers is not less than cognitive, but it may be said to be more than cognitive. To use Calvin's language, it is not merely something that flits around in the mind: this knowledge which comes by the illumination of the Spirit must be sealed upon the heart.

It now remains to pour into the heart itself what the mind has absorbed. For the Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart... But if it is true that the mind's real understanding is illumination by the Spirit of God, then in such confirmation of the heart His power is much more clearly manifested... The Spirit accordingly serves as a seal, to seal up in our hearts those very promises, the certainty of which it has previously impressed upon our minds. <sup>56</sup>

An important point arises here. If the 'faith' of which Calvin speaks consisted simply in cognitive knowledge, then it would inevitably fall within the grasp of human capacity. On this view, even if the illumination of the Spirit began as a gift of divine grace, it would cease to be so if the knowledge it imparted could be comprehended by the human mind. But the knowledge which comes by faith always remains beyond the grasp of the human mind. Here, as ever, Calvin asserts the constant and complete dependence of Adam upon God:

When we call faith "knowledge" we do not mean comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception. For faith is so far above sense perception that man's mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it. Even where the mind has attained, it does not comprehend what it feels. But while it is persuaded of what it does not grasp, by the very certainty of its persuasion it understands more than if it perceived anything human by its own capacity. <sup>57</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

The aim of this chapter has been to trace 'the way we receive the

grace of Christ; what benefits come to us and what effects follow', as Calvin relates them, and also to show that the account Calvin gives of the knowledge we have of the Redeemer is parallel to his account of the knowledge of the Creator which Adam enjoyed in his original integrity.

It has been suggested that although Calvin speaks of the atonement as something Christ achieved for all humanity, he nevertheless asserts that not all humanity enters into its benefits. Book III of the *Institutes* is Calvin's attempt to explain how this is so. He argues that Adam comes to an appropriation of Christ's saving death only by faith; and by 'faith' Calvin means a passive dependence upon God which is constantly and completely animated by the Holy Spirit. This work of the Spirit is experienced by an individual as an illumination of the mind, as knowledge; but at the same time, the individual is brought to a participation in Christ by the same Spirit. It was found that the knowledge in which faith consists is not merely cognitive: it does not 'flit about in the mind'. but is sealed upon the heart. It is a knowledge beyond human comprehension.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Chapter 2.
- 2 The four stages of the argument of the previous section are set out on pages 161-162.
- 3 Kendall has suggested that "the first time in English theology the word 'limited' is used concerning Christ's death for the elect" may be in the *Workes* of William Perkins. (ie.: 1590's). See R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* (O. U. P., Oxford 1979) p. 58.

It is clear is that soon after Perkins, and particularly after the publication of the Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht (Dort) (1618-19), not only the word but also the developed doctrine became a commonplace in Calvinist thought. The significant point is not simply that, from the time of the Synod of Dordrecht onwards, the doctrine of limited atonement was one of the basic tenets of "Five point Calvinism", but further that much of the recent discussion of Calvin's own understanding of the atonement has been conducted in the context of the relationship of his theology to that of post-Dordrecht Calvinism.

Thus the question of whether an explicit doctrine of limited atonement represents a significant departure from the teaching of Calvin himself, or is rather a logical doctrinal development is very often allowed to give shape to contemporary studies of the Reformer's own doctrine. This is the case to a greater or lesser extent in all of the following works:

- P. Helm, "Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981) pp. 179-185.  
----- *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1982).
- M. C. Bell, "Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983) pp. 115-123.  
----- "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" *Scottish Journal Theology* 36 (1983) pp. 535-540.
- P. Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985) pp. 197-225.
- J. H. Rainbow, *The Will of God and the Cross* (Pickwick Publications, Pennsylvania 1990).
- J. B. Torrance, "The Incarnation and Limited Atonement," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983) pp. 83-94.
- C. D. Daniel, "Did John Calvin teach Limited Atonement?" in his *Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh 1983).

It is significant that studies in which Calvin's doctrine of the atonement is explored primarily in relation to later Calvinist thought (whether they seek to emphasise continuity or discontinuity between Calvin and his successors) give scant attention to the Adam-Christology which we shall find is so central to Calvin's own writings on the subject. As we have indicated above, the shape of this present examination of the redeeming work of the Word of God, and the way it becomes efficacious for Adam, is determined by the parallel concept of the creative work of the Word of God in Calvin's own writings, and not by concepts of later writers.

- 4 Daniel; p. 787. Daniel has assembled an impressive array of quotations: pp. 787-789.
- 5 Comm. John 1. 29, p. 32.
- 6 Comm. Gal. 5. 12, p. 99.
- 7 Comm. Col. 1. 14, p. 308.
- 8 *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*; ed. and trans. L. Nixon (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI 1952) pp. 95-96. (Hereafter cited as Nixon: *Deity*.)
- 9 Comm. Mk. 1. 29, p. 160.

Reference should be made in this context to the prominent strand of *Christus Victor* in Calvin's Christology. The victory won by Christ over sin and the world, death and the devil is a final victory. Death is swallowed up, the powers of evil are overthrown, and humanity is set free: see Comm. Heb. 5. 7, p. 65; Comm. Mk. 5. 6, p. 285; Comm. Mt. 12. 29, pp. 43, 44; and Comm. John 6. 15, p. 149.

10 Nixon: *Deity*; p. 55: cf. Inst III. i. 1, p. 537.

11 Comm. 1 Peter 1. 20, p. 249.

12 Comm. Mk. 14. 24, p. 139.

13 Comm. John 1. 29, p. 32.

See Comm. John 3. 16, p. 73:

The whole substance of our salvation is not to be sought anywhere else than in Christ, and so we must see by what means Christ flows to us and why He was offered as our Saviour. Both points are clearly told us here - that faith in Christ quickens all and that Christ brought life because the heavenly Father does not wish the human race that he loves to perish.

Comm. 2 Pet. 3. 9, p. 364,

This is His wondrous love towards the human race, that He desires all men to be saved, and is prepared to bring even the perishing to safety.

It is true that Calvin goes on:

It could be asked here, if God does not want any to perish, why do so many in fact perish? My reply is that no mention is made here of the secret decree of God by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his loving kindness as it is made known to us in the gospel.

But while this amounts to a qualification of the previous remark, it is not a repudiation of it.

It is perhaps at this point that the cost of interpreting Calvin's theology through a scholastic framework is at its greatest, for it is at this point that the expansive note so clear in these texts is lost through the interpretation placed upon them in later Calvinist thought. It is possible to give even these statements a sense consistent with the thought of the Westminster divines, as recent articles (Helm: *English Calvinism*; Nicole: *Calvin's View*.) have shown. But in the process, Calvin's emphasis is clearly lost. For the plain meaning of these texts is surely that there is an aspect to the atonement which is universal in its scope and which has an important place in the doctrine as Calvin expounds it: the kindness of God is indiscriminate; God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception; by the sacrifice of his death all the sins of the whole world have been expiated; Christ bore away all the wickedness and all the iniquities of the whole world; and that all this is made known to us in the Gospel.

14 Inst. II. xvi. 3, p. 505-506.

15 Comm. Rom. 5. 17, p. 116.

16 Inst. II. xii. 7, p. 472.

17 Comm. 1 Pet. 2. 24, p. 279.

It is consistently the case that Calvin seeks to avoid any kind of suggestion that the scope of the redemption is limited, in the sense of being inadequate or circumscribed. He own position is rather that

No language indeed can fully express the fruit and efficacy of Christ's death." Comm. Eph. 5.2, p.196.

No words can rightly express what this means: for who can find language to declare the excellency of the Son of God? Comm Gal. 2.20, p.44.

18 Comm., p.242.

19 Comm. Rom. 5.8, p.118.

20 Comm. Gal. 2.20, p.44.

21 Inst. III.1.1, p.537.

22 Kendall: *English Calvinism* notes this connection: p.13, n.2.

23 Inst. III.1.1, p.537.

24 Comm. Heb. 9.28, p.131.

25 Comm. Eph. 2.8, p.144.

26 1536 Inst. I.6, p.18.

27 III.11.1, p.543.

28 III.11.1, p.543.

29 Kendall: *English Calvinism*.

Helm: *Calvin and the Calvinists*.

B. A. Gerrish, "Atonement and Saving Faith," *Theology Today* 17 (1960) pp.181-191.

A. N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance," *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979) pp.32-54.

30 Inst. III.11.6, p.549.

31 Inst. III.11.7, p.551.

32 Inst. III.11.29, p.575.

33 Inst. III.11.30, p.576.

34 Inst. III.x11.5, p.768.

35 Comm. John 6.29, p.156.

36 Inst. III.11.35, p.583.

37 Kendall: *English Calvinism*; p.19.

On the passive character of faith according to Calvin, compare:

We ask only what faith finds in the Word of the Lord upon which to lean and rest... Accordingly, we need the promise of grace, which can testify to us that the Father is merciful; since we can approach him

in no other way, and upon grace alone the heart of man can rest. Inst. III.ii.7, p.550.

The knowledge of God's goodness will not be held very important unless it makes us rely on that goodness. Inst. III.ii.7, p.551.

Calvin also compares faith to "a kind of vessel" (Inst. III.xi.7, p.733.), and refers to it as something which "as is well known... depends on God alone. Comm Hab.2.4, p.73.

38 Comm. Hab. 2.4, p.75.; see also Gen 2.9, p.117, cited above, p.108.

39 Forstman: *Word and Spirit*; p.68.

40 Inst. I.viii.5, p.81.

41 Inst. III.i.4, p.541.

42 Inst. III.i.4, p.541.

43 Inst. III.i.1, p.537.

44 p.583. This passage is not cited by Forstman: *Word and Spirit*. Nevertheless he reaches a similar conclusion about these two aspects of the work of the Spirit in redemption in Calvin's theology. He writes, p.72:

The work of the Spirit in relation to faith can be expressed in three closely related statements. First, it effects salvation for an individual. What God has done in Christ is directed toward the individual through the work of the Spirit. Second, coincident with this work the Spirit also effects a subjective apprehension of it in the individual. One is persuaded that what has happened in Christ has happened "for me", *erga me*. Also through this work of the Spirit one is united to Christ by such an intimate and secure bond that the union can never be severed.

This is a very similar account to the one given in this chapter. But it is not clear what distinction Forstman intends, by separating the first of his 'three closely related statements' from the third. How else is the salvation wrought by God in Christ 'directed toward the individual', according to Calvin, except by the union with Christ effected by the Spirit? In the light of the two-fold distinction which is explicit in *The Institutes* III.ii.35 (cited above), we may re-phrase Forstman's analysis as follows:

The work of the Spirit in relation to faith can be expressed in **two** closely related statements. First, it effects salvation for an individual. What God has done in Christ is directed toward the individual through the work of the Spirit. Through this work of the Spirit, one is united to Christ by such an intimate and secure bond that the union can never be severed. Second, coincident with this work the Spirit also effects a subjective apprehension of it in the individual. One is persuaded that what has happened in Christ has happened 'for me', *erga me*.

The effect of changing a single word and moving a single sentence is to bring Forstman's analysis fully into line with the position adopted here.

There *is* a passage, cited by Forstman, in which Calvin does divide the *ordo salutis* into three parts, as follows:

There are two main heads to this covenant; the first as regards the free remission of sins, and the second regarding the inward renewing of the heart. There is a third which is dependent upon the second, about minds that are illumined in the knowledge of God. Comm. Heb. 8. 10, p. 110.

Forstman comments: "In these three parts is comprehended the subject matter of the two chapters of *The Institutes* on the work of the Spirit in the believer."

This is manifestly a misunderstanding. 'The gratuitous remission of sins' to which Calvin refers - the first part of 'this covenant' under discussion in Hebrews chapter 8 - is the subject matter of *Institutes* Book II. It is not the subject of either Book III.1, or Book I.vii, which are the two places taken by Forstman to be those in which Calvin addresses 'the work of the Spirit in the believer'. Only the remaining two parts identified by Calvin in this excerpt from his *Hebrews Commentary* are relevant to our present subject. They are first, 'the inward renovation of the heart', and second, 'the illumination of the mind', and these two equate to the distinction made in this chapter between the 'participation' and the 'illumination' effected in the believer by the Spirit.

45 Inst. III.1.1, p.538.

46 Inst. III.11.30, p.576.

47 Inst. III.1.3, p.541.

48 Inst. III.1.1, p.537.

49 Inst. III.11.33, p.580.

50 Inst. III.11.34, p.582.

51 Although admittedly Calvin has his own interpretation of what is meant, theologically, by 'knowledge', just as he does of what is meant by "faith": see below.

52 Inst. III.11.2, p.545.

53 Inst. III.11.3, p.545.

54 Inst. III.11.2, p.545.

55 Inst. III.11.6, p.549.

56 Inst. III.11.36, p.583-584.

57 Inst. III.11.14, p.559.

- CHAPTER 9 -

THE SPIRIT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE HEARING OF  
THE WORD OF GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES:

**Introduction:**

A clear parallel exists in Calvin's thought between the way in which Adam was able to hear the Eternal Word of God in his created integrity, and the way in which fallen Adam is able to appropriate the redeeming work of the Incarnate Word of God. The purpose of this section of the thesis is to demonstrate that this parallel can be extended one stage further: it is by the animating power of the Spirit alone that the redeemed community are enabled to hear the Word of God in the Scriptures.

The way that Calvin arrives at his assertion that God makes himself known in the Scriptures has been discussed above.<sup>1</sup> When Calvin speaks of Scripture as the Word of God, he does so advisedly: the practice expresses his firm conviction that knowledge of God is truly to be found in these writings. This conviction about the written Word is a theological conclusion, derived from his understanding of both the Eternal and the Incarnate Word of God.

An attempt has also been made to show how it is that Calvin considers it is possible for God to make himself known in the written Word.<sup>2</sup> The study of the category of accommodation in Calvin's thought has indicated that parallels exist between his understanding of the Eternal Word of God, of the Incarnate Word and of the written Word, as far as the possibility of the speaking of the Word of God is concerned. It is what Calvin might call 'a settled principle' that God has accommodated the knowledge of himself to our capacity. In particular, it is in this way that the possibility arises for God to make himself known in the written Word.

But given that the Scriptures bear the name of the Word of God because the knowledge of God is to be found in them, and given that it is possible

for God to reveal himself there because the knowledge he gives of himself is an accommodated knowledge, the question still remains: how is it possible for human beings to receive the knowledge of God which is contained in the Scriptures? It is this question that is addressed here. How is it possible for a human being to hear the Word of God in the Scriptures?

This question takes up the correlation of the Word and the Spirit, as it has already been explored in relation to creation and redemption, and inquires after their function in relation to sanctification. For just as there is a primary correspondence between creation and the 'hearing' of the Eternal Word of God, and between redemption and the 'hearing' of the Incarnate Word, so there is a primary correspondence between sanctification and the 'hearing' of the written Word of God. That is to say, it will become evident that Calvin thinks of the Scriptures primarily in terms of their sanctifying power for the people of God, and that he argues that the Scriptures have this power only by the grace of God. The sanctifying power of the Scriptures is bound in a peculiar way to the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

In order to establish that this is in fact the case, the present discussion will follow the same pattern as the two foregoing studies: one which focussed upon the work of the Spirit in relation to the possibility of Adam's knowledge of God in creation, and the other, parallel to it, which focussed upon the work of the Spirit in relation to the possibility of the knowledge of God in redemption. Following the pattern of those previous discussions, in the present exploration of the work of the Spirit in relation to the possibility of the knowledge of God in sanctification, the argument will proceed in four stages:

1. The purpose of the written Word of God is to sanctify the redeemed people of God. At times Calvin's thought appears to suggest that the Word

of God in Scripture is automatically and universally efficacious for the sanctification of the child of God.

2. But this is emphatically not the case. Even the elect have no automatic access to the Word of God in Scripture. Calvin insists that the Word of God will inevitably be unfruitful in the life of a believer if the Scriptures are improperly used.

3. It is only when the Scriptures are approached with docility and humility that the Word of God will be heard in them. Thus even the elect are constantly dependent upon the grace of God for the hearing of the Word of God.

4. It is the Holy Spirit alone who is the source of this docility and humility, without which the Scriptures cannot be read with profit. Thus it is to the Spirit alone that Calvin ascribes the work of enlivening the Scriptures and making them effective in the life of the believer.

The remainder of this chapter is a development of these stages of the argument. Attention will be given to each in turn, to clarify its place within Calvin's thought.

**1. The purpose of the written Word of God is to sanctify the redeemed people of God. At times Calvin's thought appears to suggest that the Word of God in Scripture is automatically and universally efficacious for the sanctification of the child of God.**

There is, in Calvin's theology, a primary correlation between the Scriptures and the work of sanctification. This correlation is expressed in two ways. First, Calvin frequently asserts that the primary purpose of the Scriptures is to edify the people of God. Secondly, he asserts that the primary way in which believers grow in godliness, is through the reading of the Scriptures.

It is to be noted that only the first of these expressions of the correlation between the Scriptures and the work of sanctification is exclusive. Calvin asserts that there are no other reasons to read the Scriptures other than the serious desire for edification:<sup>3</sup> it is for this reason and no other that the Scriptures have been given. But he does accept that there are other ways, apart from reading the Bible, in which to grow in godliness: for instance by hearing sermons and receiving the sacraments. Calvin holds, however, that these other activities are derivative, and the primary correlation - between growing in godliness and reading the Bible - remains intact. Indeed, although it is only primary, Calvin does occasionally express even this correlation as if it were exclusive after all.

First then, are Calvin's assertions about the purpose of all Bible-reading. It is to grow in godliness. When we read the Scriptures, we should always have this purpose in mind.

In the reading of Scripture we ought ceaselessly to endeavour to seek out and meditate upon those things which make for edification.<sup>4</sup>

This is the whole of what we should seek in the Scriptures: to be well acquainted with Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches which are comprised in him; and which are by him offered to us from God the Father... And, in fact, since all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are his in him, it is not well to have any other end or object... But our understanding must be altogether stayed at this point, to learn in the Scriptures to know only Jesus Christ, in order to be by him conducted straight to the Father.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin has very strong views about this; and he would outlaw all other uses of Scripture if he could.

We may today condemn all [interpreters of Scripture] who abandon concern for edification and agitate over ingenious but profitless questions. Whenever ingenious trifles of that kind are introduced, they should be warded off with this phrase as with a shield, 'Scripture is profitable'. It follows from this that it is wrong to use it unprofitably. In giving us the Scriptures, the Lord did not intend either to gratify our curiosity or satisfy our desire for ostentation or provide us with a chance for mythical invention and foolish talk; He intended rather to do us good. Thus the right use of Scripture must always lead to what is profitable.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed,

Scripture is corrupted by sinful abuse when this profitable purpose is not sought in it.<sup>7</sup>

In this way Calvin asserts the correlation between the work of sanctification and the purpose of the Scriptures: it is exclusively to the end that they may be edified in reading it that the Bible has been given to the people of God.

As has been suggested, the same correlation is expressed the other way around: if the people of God wish to be sanctified, it is primarily to the reading of Scripture that they are directed. It is clear that Calvin accepts that other activities may also edify the people of God, besides the reading of Scripture. In particular he recognises the important function of preaching and the sacraments in this regard. But although these might appear at first sight to qualify the correlation between the work of sanctification and the purpose of Bible-reading, we shall see that in fact they serve only to emphasise it.

At any rate, in the first instance, it may be said that Calvin's view is that edification comes primarily from 'hearkening to the Scriptures'.

Paraphrasing the apostle Paul, the Reformer argues the point as follows:

'There is nothing', he says, 'in Scripture which may not contribute to your instruction and the training of your life.' This notable passage shows us that the oracles of God contain nothing vain or unprofitable. At the same time also it instructs us that it is by the reading of the Scripture that we make progress in godliness and holiness of life... All that we learn from Scripture is conducive to the advancement of godliness.<sup>8</sup>

That is to say, not only is there nothing in Scripture which will not edify the believer, but - more startlingly - it is primarily by the reading of Scripture that we advance in godliness. Indeed,

We ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture, if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for this is simply that:

God has ordained His Word as the instrument by which Jesus Christ with

all His graces is dispensed to us.<sup>10</sup>

But Calvin does acknowledge that the written Word is not the only such instrument. God has ordained that the preached Word and the sacraments should also have this purpose. In particular, the sacraments are destined by God 'for the same use and purpose' as the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Calvin calls upon the Church to regard 'as a settled principle that':

The sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.<sup>12</sup>

And again:

Sacraments are truly named the testimonies of God's grace and are like seals of the goodwill that he feels towards us, which by attesting that goodwill to us, sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith.<sup>13</sup>

And this function is shared by the ministry of preaching too. Preachers are instruments in the hand of God, according to Calvin, by whose ministry the people of God are further edified.

What is more excellent than to form the true Church of Christ, in order that it may be established in its right and perfect soundness? But this work so admirable and divine, the apostle here declares to be accomplished by the external ministry of the Word.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Calvin ascribes to the ministry an important role in the edification the people of God. And in what immediately follows this last excerpt from his Commentary on Ephesians, Calvin appears to draw attention to the ministry quite specifically to qualify the role of the Scriptures in this respect:

From this it is plain that those who neglect this means [i.e.: the ministry of preaching] and yet hope to become perfect in Christ are mad. Such are the fanatics, who invent secret revelations of the Spirit for themselves, and the proud, who think that for them the private reading of the Scriptures is enough, and that they have no need of the common ministry of the Church.<sup>15</sup>

The same kind of apparent qualification is evident in his comments on 2 Timothy 2. 15.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, of course, Paul does not conceive of the ministry of

preaching as a qualification of the importance of the Scriptures in the edification of the people of God. The preaching ministry functions rather to safeguard the place of the Scriptures, as is clear from a careful reading of even the citations given above. The purpose of the ministry is to expound the Scriptures, precisely in order that the Scriptures may do their edifying work.

But it should be noticed that Calvin understands the relationship of the sacraments to the Scriptures in a similar way. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not rivals to the importance of the Scriptures in the life of the people of God, any more than the ministry of preaching is. The Sacraments function, as the ministry does, to safeguard the primary role ordained by God for the Scriptures, as the instrument by which the people of God grow in faith and godliness. Thus in his Commentary on John's Gospel (20.22) Calvin speaks of the Word as 'the source from which the sacraments derive their strength' and reminds his readers that:

the effect of all the things which believers receive from the sacraments depends upon the testimony of the Word.<sup>17</sup>

There is, then, an almost exclusive correlation in Calvin's thought, between the work of sanctification on the one hand, and the purpose of the Scriptures on the other.

The question thus arises, whether the sanctifying power of the Scriptures is inherent, and automatically and universally efficacious in Calvin's exposition. At times, Calvin's language implies that it is so. This is the case, for instance in his tendency to speak of what has been 'delivered' and 'sealed' in the Scriptures,<sup>18</sup> as if it is in its propositional content that the edifying power of the Scriptures lies. But this sense of the Scriptures inherent power is most explicit when Calvin is addressing the composition of the Scriptures directly. It almost seems as if, given the work of the Spirit in the composition of the Scriptures,<sup>19</sup>

Calvin held that no further work of the Spirit is necessary for a believer to hear the Word of God in them. At times the Reformer implies that because the Scriptures are from God, it follows that they can be read efficaciously at will. Thus Calvin writes as follows:

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 others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, *in spite of yourself*, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigour 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 endeavour, breathe something divine.<sup>20</sup>

From this passage, and others like it,<sup>21</sup> one might infer that it was Calvin's contention that the sanctifying power of the Scriptures was inherent, and that it edifies the people of God *in spite of themselves*. To read the Scriptures, it might be thought, is automatically and predictably to hear the Word of God. In this way, Calvin's writings can sometimes be construed as suggesting that possessing the Scriptures is - to use a metaphor of sight rather than of sound for a moment - to possess a pair of spectacles with which to perceive the truth about God clearly. Put on these spectacles, and this power is possessed.<sup>22</sup>

A similar impression can certainly be received of Calvin's doctrine of preaching - that he held this, too, to be inherently and automatically efficacious.<sup>23</sup> And if the same cannot be said of Calvin's view of the sacraments - I have been unable to find a single instance in which one might receive a similar impression about the efficacy of baptism and the eucharist in the Reformer's writings - it might perhaps be argued that this was simply because of the struggle in which he found himself engaged against the prevailing 'Papist' view.<sup>24</sup>

But in fact Calvin's view of the sacraments is a much better guide to

his thought about the efficacy of divine instruments in general, and about the Word of God in particular, than this argument would suggest. And the impression that Calvin thought of the written or the preached Word as having any inherent power is certainly incorrect. The view that the Scriptures, let alone the preaching ministry or the sacraments were efficacious in themselves would be to credit them with 'a magical potency'.<sup>25</sup> And this is a position Calvin not only avoided taking up, but also one that he sought very definitely to oppose. In fact the evidence upon which we have drawn up to this point is highly selective. It will become evident that Calvin strongly resists the notion that the Scriptures, let alone preaching or the sacraments, are automatically and universally efficacious for the sanctification of the people of God.

**2. Indeed, this is emphatically not the case. Even the elect have no automatic access to the Word of God in Scripture. Calvin insists that the Word of God will inevitably be unfruitful in the life of a believer if the Scriptures are improperly used.**

It is plainly Calvin's own position that the reading of the Scriptures (or derivatively, hearing a sermon or receiving the sacraments) may be unfruitful. For the efficacy of the Word of God can, indeed will inevitably, be impeded by human wickedness.

The Word of God is like the sun, 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.<sup>26</sup>

God calls us to Himself without effect, as long as He speaks only with a human voice. He certainly teaches and commands what is right, but his words fall on deaf ears. If we seem to hear anything, our ears are struck merely by the outward sound, but our hearts, being full of wickedness and stubbornness, reject all sound doctrine.<sup>27</sup>

In his Commentary upon 2 Timothy 3.6, Calvin asserts that

In order that [Scripture] may be profitable to salvation to us, we have to learn to make right use of it.

He then goes on to ask

What if someone is interested only in curious speculations? What if he adheres only to the Law and does not seek Christ? What if he perverts the natural meaning with interpretations alien to it?<sup>29</sup>

And the implied answer to these rhetorical questions is clearly that the exercise of reading the Scriptures with these other ends in view will be profitless, because they are misconceived. And if this is so of the Scriptures, it is all the more true of the sacraments and of preaching: unless these are used properly, they too will be profitless.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the exclusive correlation Calvin makes between the work of sanctification, and the purpose of the Scriptures, and despite the extremely high view he holds of the inspiration of the Spirit in the composition of the Scriptures, and despite the occasional statements he makes which convey a contrary impression at first sight: despite all these things it is emphatically not Calvin's argument that the Scriptures are automatically and universally efficacious for the sanctification of the people of God. The fact is that Calvin argues strongly that if we are to profit from the reading of Scripture - that is, if we are to hear the Word of God there - it is necessary to make the right use of it.

**3. It is only when the Scriptures are approached with docility and humility that the Word of God will be heard in them. Thus even the elect are constantly dependent upon the grace of God for the hearing of the Word of God.**

What then is this 'right use' of Scripture, which is of such importance to Calvin? What is it necessary to do, in order to use the Bible properly? The answer lies in Calvin's premise that 'all right

knowledge of God is born of obedience'.<sup>30</sup> Obedience is always a prerequisite for the hearing of the Word of God: whether it is the Eternal, the Incarnate or the written Word that is spoken. In order to hear the Word of God in the Scriptures, argues Calvin, it is necessary to approach them in a spirit of humility and reverence. The Scriptures are used properly when they are read with docility, and with a readiness to learn.

Calvin's thought is helpfully set out, for instance, in the Geneva Catechism of 1545. There the catechumen is led to the Bible, and is asked how this Scripture should be used to obtain profit from it. The answer prescribed runs as follows:

If we lay hold of it with complete heartfelt conviction as nothing else than certain truth come down from heaven; if we show ourselves docile to it; if we subdue our wills and minds to his obedience; if we love it heartily; if having it once engraved on our hearts and its roots fixed there, so that it bring forth fruit in our life; if finally we be formed to its rule - then it will turn to our salvation, as intended.<sup>31</sup>

Or as he puts it elsewhere, more simply:

There must be docility, in order that God's Word may obtain credit, authority and favour among us.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, Calvin observes that this humility is expected of those who wish to hear the Word of God in the ministry of preaching. Drawing attention to the way that God's own words are not clearly distinguished from those of his servant Moses, Calvin makes an interesting observation, in the course of a sermon on Deuteronomy. He writes that in the light of this failure to distinguish the Word of God from its agent:

We see how God wishes His Word to be received in such humility when He sends men to declare what He commands them, as if He were in them midst of us. The doctrine, then, which is put forward in the name of God, ought to be as authoritative as if all the Angels of Heaven descended to us, as if God himself had revealed His majesty before our eyes. In this way He wishes to test the obedience of our faith.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, this emphasis on obedience, humility and docility is analogous to the emphasis on the humility required of Adam in his created integrity, which we encountered in our study of how it is possible for

human beings to appropriate the knowledge of God the Creator. It is also analogous to the emphasis Calvin places on faith, in his account of what is required of those who aspire to the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

It is worth noting that this emphasis also has a parallel in what Calvin has to say about the sacraments. For here too we find a sure echo of Calvin's insistence that the Word of God can only be heard by those who have faith. For it is only where there is faith that the sacraments are effective: those who receive the sacraments without faith, will certainly not profit from them.

[The sacraments] avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.<sup>34</sup>

We must hold, therefore, that there is a mutual relation between faith and the sacraments, and hence that the sacraments are effective through faith.<sup>35</sup>

This then, is the right use of the Scriptures which Calvin commends to those who would hear the Word of God. The Scriptures are to be read humbly, with docility and with a will to obey them. In making 'docility' the prerequisite for the hearing of the Word of God in the Scriptures, it is evident that Calvin implies nothing less than a total dependence upon the Holy Spirit. For we shall see that this docility is not an attitude that human beings can adopt for themselves.

**4. It is the Holy Spirit alone who is the source of this docility and humility, without which the Scriptures cannot be read with profit. Thus it is to the Spirit alone that Calvin ascribes the work of enlivening the Scriptures and making them effective in the life of the believer.**

In our study of the hearing of the Word of God in creation, it became clear that it was not within Adam's capacity to achieve the humility required of him, but that he was entirely dependent for this attitude upon the work of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, our study of the hearing of

the Word of God in redemption has shown that it is not within human capacity to produce that faith which is the *sine qua non* of salvation; once again Calvin's thought emphasises the complete dependence of humanity upon God's grace in the work of the Holy Spirit. This same dependence characterises the docility required of all who would hear the Word of God in the Scriptures. We shall see that in Calvin's exposition, this attitude too is beyond the capacity of a human being to effect. Docility is a possibility as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit alone.

Certainly, a person cannot be 'docile' and learn from the Scriptures by the positive exertion of his will.

There must certainly be very little hope of a man who is swollen headed with confidence in his own abilities ever proving himself docile. That is why the reading of Scripture bears fruit with such a few people today, because scarcely one in a hundred is to be found who gladly submits himself to its teaching.<sup>36</sup>

No: in order for the believer to hear the Word of God in the Scriptures,

[God must] correct our slowness of apprehension and render us docile by the secret influence of his Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

And,

When we come to hear a sermon or take up the Bible, we must not have the foolish arrogance of thinking that we shall easily understand everything we hear or read. But we must come with reverence, we must wait entirely upon God, knowing that we need to be taught by his Spirit, and that without Him we cannot understand anything that is shown in His Word.<sup>38</sup>

Here Calvin both attributes the necessary reverence or docility to the work of the Holy Spirit, and explains that such an attitude represents a 'waiting *entirely* upon God'; or - to use the language we have already drawn upon - he reminds believers that they are to '*depend* on... the Spirit'.

There is true reverence for Scripture when we acknowledge that there is hidden in it a wisdom which surpasses and escapes all our powers of understanding; yet we do not feel aversion to it for that reason, but, reading diligently, we depend on the revelation of the Spirit and long for an interpreter to be given to us.<sup>39</sup>

The same point is expressed with great clarity in the 1545 Geneva Catechism from which we have already quoted. Immediately after the

question about the way in which Scripture is to 'be used to obtain profit from it', to which the catechetical answer focusses upon docility and obedience, the candidate is challenged regarding the source of these attributes.

- M. Are all these things placed within our power?
- C. None of them whatever; but all this I have mentioned is of God only, to be effected by the gift of his Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Given that we find this line of thought in Calvin's writings on the subject of the written Word, it is no surprise to discover its echo in what he has to say about the preached Word. The humility with which preaching is to be received is just as completely the work of the Spirit, and just as far beyond the capacity of a human being to achieve.

Therefore God proclaims His law by human voice in vain unless He writes it in our hearts by His Spirit, that is, unless He forms and fits us for obedience.<sup>41</sup>

In short the Word of God never reaches our hearts, since they are iron or stony until they are softened by him... Therefore God proclaims His law by a human voice in vain, unless He writes it in our hearts by His Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

Nor is it a surprise to find that Calvin also denies to human beings the power to bring to the sacraments the faith with which they must be received if they are to bear fruit. For this, too, believers are utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit:

[The sacraments] are of no further benefit unless the Holy Spirit accompanies them. For he it is who opens our minds and hearts and makes us receptive to this testimony... The Holy Spirit... is He who brings the graces of God with Him, gives a place for the sacraments among us, and makes them bear fruit.<sup>43</sup>

Now, with regard to the hearing of the written Word of God, we thus find ourselves presented with an interesting triple correlation. Not only between the work of sanctification and the purpose of the Scriptures, but between these and the docility of the believer too. Or, to use language closer to Calvin's own, between teachableness, the Teacher and what is taught (the '*doctrina*' of Scripture). Calvin's consistent concern for the

priority of God in the knowledge of God is such that he emphasises the work of the Spirit as Teacher not only in the composition of what is taught (the Scriptures) but also in the appropriation of what is taught by those who learn, by rendering them 'teachable'.<sup>44</sup>

In the context of the hearing of the Word of God in the Scriptures, it is this accent on docility which serves to emphasise that, as in relation to creation and redemption, so in relation to sanctification, the dependence of the believer upon the Holy Spirit is not a transient thing. It is in order to underline that it is not possible for a human being to outlive this need for the assistance of the Spirit, that Calvin does not express the sanctifying work of the Spirit only in terms of illumination. In fact, with great consistency, we find that Calvin links the illumination which the Spirit brings to the believer's mind, with this effecting of docility in the believer's heart.

And it will not be enough for the mind to be illumined by the Spirit of God, unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by his power.<sup>45</sup>

The heavenly teaching is of no use or effect to us unless as far as the Spirit shapes our minds to understand it, and our hearts to accept its yoke.<sup>46</sup>

It is common enough for interpreters to draw attention to the illuminating work of the Spirit in Calvin's theology. In an attempt to draw out the significance of Calvin's emphasis on 'docility' for the dependence of the believer upon the Holy Spirit, the present analysis of Calvin's theology has given this later aspect priority over the former. The point is this: the illumination of the Scriptures, which is one aspect of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and by which the Word of God is able to penetrate the mind of the believer, never results in the believer's independence from God. The knowledge that results from such an illumination, is not a knowledge that confers independent power upon the knower. It is a knowledge rooted and nourished in obedience. To put it

crudely, the work of the Spirit to bring sanctification to the mind is never separated in Calvin's thought from the work of the Spirit in bringing sanctification to the heart. Thus the believer's mind is opened to receive the knowledge of God, so the believer's heart is softened to submit to what is learnt there.

Needless to say, the same complete and permanent dependence upon the Spirit is expressed by Calvin in similar terms in relation to the ministry of the Word, and the sacraments. His point with regard to the ministry of preaching is not just that preaching is only effective by the gracious power of the Holy Spirit, but that as a result both preacher and hearers are completely and constantly dependent upon the Spirit. The efficacy of the Spirit, in other words, is never relinquished to a human being. God never resigns his own office.

But when Paul calls himself a minister of the Spirit, he does not mean that the grace and power of the Holy Spirit are so bound to his preaching that he could, whenever he wished, breathe out the Spirit along with the words that he spoke. He simply means that Christ has blessed his ministry with His Spirit... That Christ should grant His power to a man's teaching is quite different from that man's teaching prevailing in its own strength alone. And so we are ministers of the Spirit not because we hold Him bound or captive and not because at our own whim we can confer His grace upon all or upon whom we please, but because through us Christ enlightens men's minds, renews their hearts and wholly regenerates them. It is because of this bond between Christ's grace and man's work that a minister is often given credit for what belongs to God alone.<sup>47</sup>

God sometimes connects Himself with His servants, and sometimes separates Himself from them:... He never resigns to them His own office.<sup>48</sup>

And the same can be shown to be the case where the sacraments are concerned: their whole efficacy depends upon the gracious activity of the Spirit.

God so acts by the sign [of baptism] that its whole efficacy depends upon His Spirit.<sup>49</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The care with which Calvin formulates his understanding of the correlation of Word and Spirit with regard to sanctification is obvious. In this context, as in the context of creation and redemption, Calvin's theology is shaped in such a way as to emphasise humanity's utter dependence upon grace for the knowledge of God. In his grace, God makes himself known in the Scriptures. In these writings it is possible for human beings to come to a knowledge of God. But this possibility is not one that lies within the capacity of any human being to achieve. Left to themselves, human beings are powerless to bring to the Scriptures the docility which is a prerequisite for their proper use. This docility is the gift of the Spirit, and only when the assistance of the Spirit is added in this way is it possible for the people of God to appropriate the sanctification which the Scriptures are ordained to convey. But when the Word and the Spirit do function together in this way, then the sanctifying power of the Scriptures is efficacious, and the written Word of God is 'heard'. Thus Calvin speaks of the Spirit as the one:

by whose oracles [the children of God] are continually recalled to the hearing of the Word.<sup>50</sup>

This experience of 'docility', by which human ears are formed to hear the Word of God is not different from the 'testimony of the Spirit' to which Calvin devotes several chapter VII of *Institutes* Book I. Much as Calvin makes (in *Institutes* I.viii) of the 'rational proofs' which also testify that Scripture is the Word of God, these are ultimately insufficient to form the human ear to hear the divine Word. 'Those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly', since

Scripture will ultimately suffice for the saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

NOTES

1 See Chapter 3.

2 See Chapter 6.

3 Unless it is the serious desire to find the saving knowledge of God there. But this is not a proper distinction for Calvin, for whom all saving knowledge has this sanctifying power, and for whom sanctification is from start to finish a development of saving knowledge.

4 Inst. I. xiv. 4, p. 164.

See also;

We are in no doubt as to the essential point - that the doctrine herein contained was dictated by the Holy Spirit for our use, and confers benefits of no ordinary kind on those who attentively peruse it. Comm. Josh. Arg., p. xviii.

5 *The Preface to the Geneva Bible*; tr. T. Weedon, 1850 (reprinted in *Evangelical Magazine* Sept/Oct 1964) pp. 22, 23.

6 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 330.

7 Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 330.

See also:

When we read scripture our aim must be to be truly edified in faith and in the fear of the Lord, to become drawn to our Lord Jesus Christ and to recognise that God has imparted Himself to us in Him that we may possess Him as our inheritance. Sermon: CO 53.560, cited by Niesel: *Theology*, p. 27.

The Scriptures should be read with the aim of finding Christ in them. Comm. John 5.39, p. 139.

The fact that he had been accustomed from his boyhood to read the Scriptures was also a powerful urge to fidelity, for this long established habit can make a man much better prepared to meet any kind of deception. Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 329.

The man who makes a right use of Scripture lacks nothing either for salvation or for a holy life. Comm. 2 Tim. 3. 16, p. 331.

And on the other hand, CR 10. 405:

It is abominable boldness to use the Scriptures at our pleasure, to play with them as with a tennis-ball as many before have done. Cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, p. 119.

8 Comm. Rom. 15. 4, pp. 304, 305. My italics.

9 Inst. I. ix. 2, p. 94.

10 OS 1.505: cited by Wallace, p. 85.

See also:

[Paul] asserts without qualification that the Scripture is sufficient to achieve perfection. Comm. 2 Tim. 3.16, p.331.

11 Inst. IV.xiv.13, p.1289.

12 Inst. IV.xiv.17, p.1292.

13 Inst. IV.xiv.7, p.1282.

See also:

The ends of the sacraments are that they may be marks and badges of Christian profession and of our community or brotherhood, to incite us to thanksgiving and exercises of faith and godly living. Consensus Tigurinus Art. XII., tr. I. D. Bunting (*Journal of Presbyterian History* 44 [1966]), p.52.

14 Comm. Eph. 4.12, p.181.

15 Comm. Eph. 4.12, p.181.

16 Since we should be satisfied only with God's Word, what purpose is there in having daily sermons and even in the office of pastor itself? Does not everybody have a chance to read the Scriptures for himself? But Paul assigns to teachers the duty of carving or dividing the Word... He advising Timothy to 'divide aright' lest, like men without skill, he succeeds only in cutting the surface and leaves the inmost pith and marrow untouched... With all these faults he contrasts a right dividing, that is, a manner of exposition adapted to edify. Comm. 2 Tim. 2.15, p.314.

17 Comm. John 20.22, pp.205-206.

See also:

Until God makes the earthly element come to life by his Word, the sacrament has no effect for us. Comm. Matt. 28.19, p.252.

Calvin's approval of Augustine's dictum that 'the elements only become sacraments when the Word is added', cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, p.135.

18 Inst. I.vii.1, p.78; IV.viii.9, p.1157.

19 I.vii.4, p.74, et al.

20 Inst. I.viii.1, p.82.

21 See, for example, I.viii.2, p.83; I.viii.11, p.91.

22 Calvin employs the metaphor, with reference to the Scriptures, albeit in relation to the knowledge of God as Creator, in Inst. I.vi.1, p.70; Inst. I.xiv.1, p.161; and Comm. Gen. Arg., p.62.

23 Peter gives no ordinary eulogy on outward preaching, in declaring that it is the life-giving Word. Comm. 1 Pet. 1.25, p.255.

24 The term 'Papist' is Calvin's own: Comm. Acts 8.13, p.233.

25 Calvin applies this phrase to the view of the sacraments held by his opponents. Given the way that he criticises the 'Papists' in that passage, he would hardly have wished to lay himself open to a similar charge regarding his own view of the Scriptures or the preaching ministry.

26 Inst. III.ii.34, p.582.

27 Comm. Heb. 8.10, pp.110,111.

28 Comm. 2 Tim. 3.16, p.329.

29 For Calvin on the inefficacy of the sacraments, improperly used see the following:

It is quite plain from Simon's example that the grace, which is figured in baptism, is not conferred on all men indiscriminately when they are baptised. It is a dogma of the Papists that unless anyone presents the obstacle of mortal sin, all men receive the truth and effect with the signs. Comm. Acts 8.13, p.233.

See also:

Consensus Tigurinus, Arts. XV and XVI, p.55.

For Calvin on the inefficacy of preaching, see material quoted below, p.210.

30 Inst. I.vi.2, p.72.

31 1545 Genevan Catechism; Reid: *Treatises*, p.130.

32 Comm. Jer. 23.36, Vol.3, p.211.

33 CO: 25.713, cited by T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God* (Lutterworth Press, London 1947) p.62

34 Inst. IV.xiv.17, p.1292.

35 Comm. Ezek. 20.20, Vol.2, p.312.

36 Comm. Acts. 8.31, p.246,247.

37 Comm. Ps. 119.125, Vol.5, p.5.

38 Serm. on 1 Tim. 3.8-10, cited by Wallace: *Word and Sacrament*, p.103.

39 Comm. Acts 8.31, p.247.

40 1545 Genevan Catechism; Reid: *Treatises*, p.130.

Also:

Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.  
Inst. III.ii.33, p.580

Therefore Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Inst. I.viii.13, p.92.

41 Comm. Heb. 8.10,11, p.111.

See also:

For by the letter he means an external preaching which does not reach the heart, and by the Spirit lifegiving teaching which is, through the grace of the Spirit, given effective operation in men's souls. Thus the term 'letter' means literal preaching which is dead and ineffective and perceived only by the ear; but the spirit is spiritual teaching that is not uttered with the mouth only but effectively makes its way with living meaning into men's minds. Comm 2 Cor. 3.6, p.42; See also: Comm. 1 Cor. 3.7, p.70; CO 54.114, cited by Parker: *Oracles*, p.64.

42 Comm. Heb. 8.10, pp.110, 111.

43 Inst. IV.xiv.17, p.1293.

44 This is surely the significance of the way Calvin's narrates his '*subito conversio*': it was a conversion to teachableness. Comm. Ps. Arg. p.xl.

45 Inst. III.ii.33, p.581.

46 Comm. Luke 24.45, p.245; cf.: Comm. Ps. 119.125, Vol.5, p.5.

47 Comm. 2 Cor. 3.4, p.43.

48 Comm. Mal. 4.6, p.629.

See also:

When Christ declares that it is the peculiar office of the Holy Spirit to teach the apostles what they had already learned from his own mouth, it follows that outward preaching will be useless and vain unless the teaching of the Spirit is added to it. So God has two ways of teaching. He sounds in our ears by the mouth of men; and He addresses us inwardly by His Spirit. These He does simultaneously or at different times, as He thinks fit. Comm. John 14.26, p.88.

The prophet teaches that nothing was accomplished by this voice till the Spirit was added. Comm. Ezek. 2.2, Vol.1, p.108.

God indeed works efficiently by his own words, but we must hold that this efficacy is not contained in the words themselves, but proceeds from the secret instinct of the Spirit...The work of the Spirit, then, is joined to the Word of God. But a distinction is made, that we may know that the external word is of no avail by itself, unless animated by the power of the Spirit... All power of action, then, resides in the Spirit himself, and thus all praise ought to be referred to God alone. Comm. Ezek. 2.2, Vol.1, p.108-109.

49 Comm. Eph. 5.26, p.206.

50 Inst. I.ix.3, p.96.

- APPENDIX -

*INSTITUTES* I. xiii. 7'

Certainly, when God's word (*Dei verbum*) is set before us in Scripture it would be the height of absurdity to imagine a merely fleeting and vanishing utterance (*vocem*), which, cast forth into the air, projects itself outside of God; and that both the oracles announced to the patriarchs and all prophecies were of this sort. Rather, "Word" (*supplied*) means the everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth. For, as Peter testifies, the ancient prophets spoke by the Spirit of Christ just as much as the apostles did [1 Peter 1.10-11; cf. 2 Peter 1.21], and all who thereafter ministered the heavenly doctrine. Indeed, because Christ had not yet been manifested, it is necessary to understand the Word (*Sermonem*) as begotten of the Father before all time [cf. Eccclus. 24.14, Vg.]. But if that Spirit, whose organs were the prophets, was truly the Spirit of the Word (*Sermonis*), we infer without any doubt that he was truly God. And Moses clearly teaches this in the creation of the universe, setting forth this Word as intermediary (*Sermonem illum intermedium statuens*). For why does he expressly tell us that God in his individual acts of creation spoke, Let this or that be done [Gen., ch.1] unless so that the unsearchable glory of God may shine forth in his image? It would be easy for censorious babblers to get around this, saying that the Word (*vocem*)<sup>a</sup> is to be understood as a bidding and command. But the apostles are better interpreters, who teach that the world was made through the Son, and that he upholds all things by his powerful word (*verbo*) [Heb. 1.2-3]. For here we see the Word (*verbum*) understood as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father (*qui ipse aeternus et essentialis est Patris Sermo*). And

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<sup>a</sup> Surely 'utterance' would be a better translation here, as in line 3.

indeed, sane and modest men do not find obscure Solomon's statement, where he introduces wisdom as having been begotten of God before time [Ecclus. 24.14, Vg.], and presiding over the creation of things and all God's works [Prov. 8.22ff.]. For it would be foolish and silly to fancy a certain temporary volition of God; when God willed to set forth his fixed and eternal plan, and also something more secret. That saying of Christ also applies here: "My Father and I have worked even to this day" [John 5.17p.]. For, affirming that he was constantly at work with the Father from the very beginning of the world, he explains more explicitly what Moses had briefly touched upon. Therefore we conclude that God has so spoken that the Word (*Sermoni*) might have his share in the work and that in this way the work might be common to both. But John spoke most clearly of all when he declared that the Word (*Sermonem illum*), God from the beginning with God, was at the same time the cause of all things, together with God the Father [John 1.1-3]. For John at once attributes to the Word (*Verbo*) a solid and abiding essence, and ascribes something uniquely his own, and clearly shows how God, by speaking, was the Creator of the universe. Therefore, inasmuch as all divinely uttered revelations are correctly designated by the term "word of God" (*verbi Dei*), so this substantial Word (*verbum illud substantiale*) is properly placed at the highest level, as the wellspring of all oracles. Unchangeable, the Word (*supplied*) abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself.

- NOTE -

1 Translation as McNeill-Battles ed., pp.129-130.

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