

Structure, II: The Knowledge of God, I

We will use a prayer from Calvin that is appropriate to this time. Let us pray.

“Almighty God, Thou didst frame heaven and earth for our sake. Thou didst witness to us through Thy servant Moses that both sun and moon are under us, and their resources we are so to use as if they were our servants. Grant then, by Thy many blessings, we may be lifted up and come to Thy true glory, that we may worship Thee in pure simplicity, and wholly surrender ourselves to Thee. May more and more be kindled to seek after righteousness and strive to glorify Thy name on earth at last coming to that blessed glory prepared for us in heaven by Christ our Lord. Amen.”

We come now to the first five chapters of Book I. There is a famous opening sentence. I am sure that Calvin thought a long time about this because, if you are writing a book of any kind, you want the first sentence to be a good one. Calvin's opening sentence has been admired and commented on quite often. He said, “Nearly all of the true and sound wisdom we possess consist of two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves. Calvin reached back into classical writings as he set forth this sentence. Cicero said something very similar. Others have also used this idea. But Calvin began this way. It is a striking sentence. In 1536, he wrote, “Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists of two parts.” By 1559, he expanded that to say, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess—almost everything we know—can be summed up under the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.”

I am not sure—and I have never seen anyone comment on this—what Calvin meant to exclude from that definition. Why did he not just say, “All the wisdom...” instead of “Nearly all the wisdom”? I do not know the answer to that because, in one sense, all of creation is under the knowledge of God. So, I do not know. If you come across anybody who does know, please tell me. You might wonder if Calvin was thinking of some very technical study, but later he talks about astronomy and knowledge of the human body. All of this comes under knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.

Well, Calvin was probably not very concerned to be exact. In fact, this is a very informal beginning for a theological treatise in the sixteenth century. It sounds more like a book that is going to be about psychology or something else. It does not sound like a medieval, theological textbook, which would be much more technical and scientific than this almost casual beginning that Calvin made. This statement that Calvin made had great significance for him.

In this first sentence, Calvin introduces something that is very crucial to his whole book, and that is twofold knowledge: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. Calvin also says that knowledge of God is also twofold: knowledge of God the Creator (Book I) and knowledge of God the Redeemer (Book II). The knowledge of ourselves is also twofold: knowledge of ourselves as created (Book I) and knowledge of ourselves as redeemed (Book II). Books III and IV flow out of the latter. Book III talks about the way that we are brought to Christ and redeemed through the Holy Spirit. Book IV talks about the way we live in community, or in the church, and in society as Christian people. The fall of Adam and Eve necessitates Book II—Creator, and then because of the Fall we need a Redeemer; ourselves as created, then because of the Fall we need to be redeemed. This idea of the twofold knowledge of God and of ourselves is quite central and important.

Let us look at Calvin's practical concern in all of this. Calvin's purpose in these opening chapters was to discuss how people would have known God (and here is the crucial statement) if Adam had remained upright. This is not knowledge of God that is available to people today because Adam did not remain

upright. Calvin begins with a discussion of the fact that God could have and would have been truly known if Adam had not fallen. There would have been a natural theology. There would have been a natural knowledge of God apart from Scripture if Adam had not fallen. But, you might also notice in these opening chapters that even though this is Calvin's purpose, he talks about people as though they had fallen. His purpose in doing that was a kind of technical flaw because Calvin said, "I am going to begin with the knowledge of God that would have been available to people in an unfallen state." However, he could not remain in that theoretical posture because he knew that people have fallen. He talks about our fallenness, our need, our weakness, and our insufficiency almost from the very first page. As Warfield puts it, "Calvin is engrossed with practical rather than merely theoretical problems." He is too much of a preacher to just sit back and theoretically try to construct a situation that would describe the unfallen state because that does not describe us anymore. He was trying to do two things at once. He was trying to begin to apply scriptural teaching to us in the very condition that we find ourselves. But, he also felt it was important (for a very specific purpose) to say what would have been true of Adam did not fall.

The other point that Calvin makes in the opening sentences is that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are joined. He says they are joined by many bonds. Calvin talks about a true knowledge of self, that is, whether we really know what we are and the miserable ruin in which we find ourselves—our emptiness, our need. He has violated his stated purpose because he is talking about fallen people here. When fallen people see the emptiness, the need, and the weakness, it leads to at least some knowledge of God. In other words, Calvin says, "Start with yourself, and if you are honest, you see what you are, and that leads to knowledge of God, who is full of wisdom, purity..." and so on.

In regard to Calvin's illustration, we look at ourselves and see not only finiteness but also foulness, and that drives us to not only see God as infinite but also as pure. So, it is both creature and fallen creature. Calvin says that if you start with God, you see His holiness. He calls it the "straight edge to which we must be shaped." That is a nice picture. God's holiness is a straight edge, a ruler, to which we must be shaped. Then, that leads us to a clearer understanding of ourselves as sinful and foolish.

For Calvin, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are joined by many bonds. One is not the same as the other, but one always leads to the other. Calvin says that it really does not matter where we start. We can start a theology by looking at ourselves, and that would lead us to God. We can start a theology by looking at God, and that would lead us to ourselves. But, he says that the right order of teaching demands that we start with God. I am not altogether sure that I understand Calvin at that point. He says that we could start either way, which would mean that the right order to teaching could start either way. The right order of teaching is that it is better to start with God even though it is possible to do it the other way.

Calvin gives a description of the true knowledge of God. In this section, Calvin defines what knowledge is. He says, "Almost all our wisdom is composed of knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves." But, before he gets into those points, he explains "knowledge." What is "knowledge of God"? First of all, it is practical knowledge. Calvin tells us in Book I and many times throughout the *Institutes* that the knowledge we have of God is true knowledge, but it is limited knowledge. The expression he likes to use is this: "We know God as He is toward us, not as He is in Himself." Did you pick up on that? We do not know God as He is in Himself. We cannot expect to know God as He is in Himself. We know God as He is toward us. There are many things we do not need to know about God. God has not expressed those elements. He speaks very sparingly of His own essence. Calvin says, "Only occasionally in a word here or there does God reveal a glimpse of His own essence. What He has given to us to know is what He is toward us, not what He is in Himself." This has caused some concern on the part of some people

that Calvin saw two Gods. He had a hidden God whom we never know, and he had a revealed God, who is the God that we are to know. What is to prevent us from fearing, then, that the God we know is not the God who is hidden?

Calvin's thought paralleled Luther's thought there. It is always hard to know how much Calvin was actually drawing from Luther. However, Calvin did know Luther. He was reading Luther, and occasionally he lets us know that. It is not impossible, and he certainly parallels Luther's thinking at that point. What Calvin really wanted to say is that there is a hidden depth to God that we could never penetrate. It is not that there are two Gods and we need to feel insecure because we only know one of the two Gods. We know what God wants us to know. Francis Schaeffer used to put it this way: "We know God truly, but we do not know God exhaustively." It seems to be that reflects Calvin's thinking here. There is practical knowledge and religious knowledge. Our knowledge of God is always going to be limited to what God wants us to know. To Calvin, knowledge itself cannot be defined as just cognitive input. It is not objective, academic knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that chapter 5 says "...flits in the brain." Our knowledge of God cannot be that kind of knowledge that flutters or flits in the brain. We shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety. That is a crucial statement. That does not mean that we add piety, devotion to God, or obedience to God to the knowledge of God, but they are part of the knowledge of God. Nobody is going to know God without worshiping God. We cannot not just sit back with a casual intellectual frame of mind and try to think about God. In the introduction, McNeill says it well when he says, "Since we owe everything to God, in Calvin's pages we are everywhere confronting God, not toying with ideas or balancing opinions about Him. So, when we think of knowledge, we have to think of knowledge that leads to devotion and obedience to God."

There are two parts to this: internal knowledge and external knowledge. Internal knowledge has two parts: awareness of God and seed of religion. External knowledge has two parts: creation and providence/history. How do we know God? Remember, Calvin is thinking how humankind would have known God if Adam had not sinned. That is where we are. Even though he keeps moving into the practical, realistic fallen state because that is where we are now, he is technically still dealing with the question the way that he introduced it: "How would people know God if Adam had not sinned?" This knowledge, as we will see, is not completely obliterated. It serves a very restricted and specialized function in the fallen state. We will come to that later.

Let us look at the knowledge of God from creation. First, there is internal revelation—that is, we are born with knowledge of God. It is instinctive. "It is naturally inborn in all," Calvin says, "fixed deep within, as it were, in the very marrow." He talks about this doctrine of the knowledge of God in which each of us is master from his or her mother's womb. A person is born with an internal revelation, an internal knowledge of God. That takes two forms. One is awareness of divinity, *sensus divinitatis*. Calvin explains it as "a certain understanding of God's divine majesty." I think the way that we would understand this is that every person has luminous awareness of God—*sensus divinitatis*. It is just there within us, born within us, deep within us, and in the very marrow of our being. But, there is more than bare perception. There is a kind of fear of or sense of God. It is not an inert perception alone. It produces an effect. There is within us this *sensus divinitatis*, which also produces within us a seed of religion—*siemen religiones*, which means "some knowledge of God's will." So, not only is there a sense or awareness of the existence of God and his divine majesty, but there is also some knowledge of His will. Calvin does not really tell us exactly all that is included here. However, I think we understand that God is to be worshiped.

There are other elements as well that seem to fill up this concept of “seed of religion.” Perhaps the best way to understand it is to relate it to natural law or, even better, to conscience. Every person has a conscience. In a later part of the *Institutes* in Book III, Chapter 19, part 15, Calvin says, “We have a witness joined to us which does not allow us to hide our sins, a sort of guardian appointed for man to note and spy out all of his secrets, his conscience.” In Book IV, Chapter 10, part 3, he says there is a “...keeper assigned to man that watches and observes all of his secrets.” So, born within us is an awareness of God’s majesty, and some sense of His law impresses itself in our conscience.

You see this, of course, everywhere. In Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, King Richard has hired a hit man to do away with Richard’s brother, Clarence. The man who is going to commit this crime is musing over what he is about to do, and he says, “Some certain drags of conscience are yet within me. It makes the man a coward. A man cannot steal, but it accuses him. A man cannot swear, but it checks him. A man cannot lay with a neighbor’s wife, but it detects him. It fills a man full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse full of God that, by chance, I found.” I do not believe that he found it by chance. But anyway, his conscience was at work and he had to return it. So, there is conscience. There is awareness of God’s divinity, and there is something deep within us that causes us to know that this divine Lawgiver has given a law and that some things are right and some things are wrong.

I was reading a book not long ago called *Three Seductive Ideas* by Jerome Kagan. One of the points that he makes is that not even the cleverest ape could be conditioned to become angry upon seeing one animal steal food from another. Kagan writes, “The primatologist, Frans de Waal, has said that chimpanzees have rules that punish those who break them. Mr. de Waal concedes, however, that he has never seen a guilty chimpanzee.” There are plenty of guilty people, and that is because God has placed within them *sensus divinitatis* and *siemen religiones*.

Let me illustrate this just one other way. This is from Lewis Thomas, the American physician. He does not write as a Christian, but his writings are intriguing. One of his books is *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler’s Ninth Symphony*. It is a long title, but it is an interesting book. He has a chapter on the lie detector. He says, “As I understand it, a human being cannot tell a lie, even a small one, without setting off a kind of smoke alarm somewhere deep in a dark lobe of the brain resulting in the sudden discharge of nerve impulses or the sudden outpouring of neuro-hormones of some sort or both. Lying, then, is stressful, even when we do it for protection or relief, escape or profit, or just for the pure pleasure of lying and getting away with it. It is a strain, distressing enough to cause the emission of signals to and from the nervous system that something has gone wrong. In a pure physiological sense, it is an unnatural act.” Once again we have an illustration of the fact that people are born with a sense of God and with some sense of right and wrong. This is instinctive. It is ineradicable. That seed remains and can in no way be uprooted. For Calvin, this meant that there cannot be any atheists.

To Calvin, coherent atheism is impossible. Calvin tries to illustrate this in certain ways. He lived just at the beginning of the time when people were beginning to be aware of primitive tribes in Africa and other places. Calvin argues that all of these tribes believe in some sort of god. I do not know if that has been sustained down to the present. But, if it has, I do not know if people have ever discovered a group of people somewhere who absolutely have no belief in any kind of superior being. Calvin said it was not true and, as far as I know, it is not true in our day either. Of course, there are plenty of people today who claim to be atheists, but there were not many in Calvin’s day. However, he knew about people who claimed to be atheist yet he said, “Their atheism is not coherent. It is not consistent. They testify to the impossibility of destroying the *sensus divinitatis* in the very things that they do or say.”

Calvin's illustration of this is quite amusing. It is Gaius Caligula, the Roman emperor who apparently claimed to be an atheist. Most Roman Emperors claimed to follow the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods whether they did or not. Gaius Caligula said he was an atheist, but according to Suetonius, the Roman historian, this man was very frightened of thunderstorms. Every time there would be a terrific storm, he would hide under his bed because he thought the gods were after him—gods he did not believe in. However, his own conduct contradicted his profession. I once read of a child in Russia when Russia was officially an atheistic state. The child said, "Mother, does God know that we do not believe in him?" That is kind of an illustration of what Calvin is saying here, that coherent atheism is impossible.

We also see this illustrated in C. S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis grew up in a Christian family. He repudiated that and went into an agnostic period or period of atheism for a while. He tells us in *Surprised by Joy* that the atheists he associated with from time to time felt an inkling of what they desired not to believe. Christians sometimes have doubts. Atheists have doubts too. On one occasion in *Surprised by Joy* there is a striking illustration of this. Lewis says, "Early in 1926, the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good." This atheist was worried. He said, "It almost looks as if it had really happened." Then Lewis says, "To understand the shattering impact of that, you would need to know the man who has certainly never since shown any interest in Christianity. But if he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the tough, were not as I would still have put it, 'safe,' where could I turn? Was there then no escape?"

So, Calvin says internal revelation is instinctive and ineradicable but ineffective. God has sown a seed of religion but scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it and none in whom it ripens. So, that internal witness is there in its two forms of sense of divinity and seed of religion, awareness of God and conscience. It is there and cannot be eliminated. However, it does not bear good fruit. It bears bad fruit in various ways, as we will see. Only the worst fruits—false religion marked by superstition and hypocrisy—come of it. Why is this true? Why is it ineffective? Is it because God did not make it strong enough? No, the sense of divinity and seed of religion are perfect witnesses to the majesty of God and to the law of God. However, it is ineffective since, as Calvin puts it in Book I, Chapter 4, part 2, "People deliberately befuddle themselves." Adam sinned. We are descendants of sinful Adam and we sin too. I like the way Calvin says it: "People deliberately befuddle themselves." One of the best illustrations of this is found in one of the Narnia books, *The Magician's Nephew*. It is talking about Uncle Andrew, and it says,

Ever since the animals had first appeared, Uncle Andrew had been shrinking further and further back into the thicket. He watched them very hard, of course, but he was not really interested in seeing what they were doing, only in seeing whether they were going to make a rush at him. Like the witch, he was dreadfully practical. He simply did not notice that Aslan was choosing one pair out of every kind of beast. All he saw, or thought he saw, was a lot of dangerous, wild animals walking vaguely about, and he kept on wondering why the other animals did not run away from the big lion. When the great moment came and the beast spoke, he missed the whole point for a rather interesting reason. When the lion had first begun singing long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song and he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was only a lion—"only a lion," he said to himself—he tried his hardest to make himself believe that it was not singing and never had been singing, only roaring might in a zoo in our own world. "Of course it cannot really have been singing," he thought. "I must have imagined it. I have been letting my nerves get out of order. Whoever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautifully the lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make

himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. The trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that very often you succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon, he could not have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.

To me, that seems to be an amazing picture of Calvin's thought. People deliberately befuddle themselves, and they cannot hear or see what is there.

Let us move on to external revelation. Internally, God puts a witness of Himself within us. Externally, there is also a witness that He gives to us. God has not only revealed Himself deep within us, but he has also revealed Himself to us. In regard to external revelation, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see Him. So, there is this voice of God within us, and there is what Calvin calls a "dazzling theater" without. First of all, in creation—the ordinary course of nature—the universe is a kind of mirror in which we can contemplate God.

The preface was one of the early things Calvin wrote in 1535 apart from the *Institutes* and several other books. He wrote the preface to the French translation of the Bible that was done for the Waldensians by Calvin's cousin, Pierre Olivétan. This preface was written in a Christian theological setting. In Calvin's preface, he wrote, "The little singing birds are singing of God. The beasts cry unto Him. The elements are in awe of Him. The mountains echo His name. The waves and fountains cast their glances at Him. Grass and flower laugh out to Him." If you did not know that Calvin wrote that unless I told you, you never would have guessed. You might have said it was written by Saint Francis of Assisi. It is an almost ecstatic appreciation of nature. You see the same thing in the Belgic Confession, which is based on Calvin's work. It says, "The universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder invisible things of God." God has placed a witness of Himself within His creation. It is included in this section where Calvin praises the liberal arts. Calvin says that the study of liberal arts should enable us to penetrate far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom. It is good to study all of these things because if you study them, you have a greater reason to see and appreciate the wonder of God. In his commentary on Genesis chapter 1, Calvin praises the study of astronomy. He says, "Astronomy is not only pleasant but also very useful to be known. It cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God whereas ingenious persons are to be honored who have extended useful labor on this subject, so those who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise." If you have interest in this and you have time, study astronomy. The more you can know about the heavens, the greater your understanding and appreciation of God.

I have just described one part of external revelation. The other part is in history. The second kind of works are outside the ordinary course of nature. So, we see two things. We see creation, and then we see the flow of history. We could call it providence or we could call it history. It, too, is a "dazzling theatre." By this, Calvin means that in the flow of history we have examples of the justice and mercy of God, which should lead us to knowledge of God. We can see God pouring out His mercy. We can see God punishing sin.

At first, this may seem like a rather weak argument to us because we do not always see that in history. Calvin acknowledges that and talks about the incompleteness of justice. So, Calvin says what we see in history is that sin will be punished, and that is the bigger picture. As we look across the whole flow of history, we see that—nations that have risen and fallen—but we do not see it perfectly. People seem to get away with a lot of bad things. Calvin says, "The incompleteness of the justice we see points to a future life." In other words, the incompleteness of the justice itself is a witness to the fact that there will be a final judgment. So, we find another great witness to us of the existence of God, but Calvin finally

crosses this out too. This external revelation is also ineffective. People deny the signs of divinity, and they are struck blind in such a dazzling theatre. If Adam had not fallen, then we would know a lot about God—not everything about God and not as much as we know with Scripture. None of this could have told us that God is triune, for instance. That comes only from the Scripture. However, if Adam had not fallen, people would have known about God. But, people deny the signs of divinity. They are struck blind in such a dazzling theatre. This is true not only of common people but also of smart people like Plato who maybe came closer than most but finally vanished in his round globe. This is the picture that Calvin gives. In reality, what we have in the fallen world is that each person's mind is like a labyrinth or maze full of confusion and frustration. Calvin completely crosses out the whole revelation in creation, which he so effectively established.

The one remaining purpose of it all, though (and this is extremely important), is inexcusability. It was there, it was given, we have it, we ruined it, we befuddle ourselves, and so we are inexcusable. The cause of failure is not insufficient light but the corruption of the human heart. The actual function of it all is inexcusability. That is all still there, and it is very important that it is still there. God is still bearing witness in those ways to Himself to every person who is born in this world. However, it does not come to fruition in real knowledge of God, but it does function to hold that person inexcusable. Nobody can say, "I did not have a chance."

Well, is there a remaining apologetical function? We do not have time to talk about that. It is a highly disputed point. In other words, is there some sort of basis here that we can use to bring to the consciousness of an unbeliever the existence and power of God? This is an important question. Calvin scholars do not agree on it. Fortunately, time is up, so I do not have to try to answer it.