

The Doctrine of God

Let us think for a moment, before the prayer, about where we are in the *Institutes* as we come now to Book I, chapters 10-13. Calvin has told us that God has planted within us an innate knowledge of Himself that is placed there to give us some understanding of who God is. It is placed deep within us, and it is also placed before us—*sensus divinitatis* and the seed of religion within as well as the created order and God's work in providence and history without. He has also told us that all of this is crossed out. It does not work, not because it is not a strong, valid testimony, but because of our sinfulness, which blinds us to see those things that are there. God then gives us an objective revelation in Scripture. Then, through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, God enables us to embrace the Scripture as the authoritative Word of God and turn to that Scripture so that in the Scripture we can see in general revelation what we would have seen if Adam had not sinned. And, as we will see today, we see far more than that. As we come to the Scriptures, then, this is the place where Scripture begins to function in Calvin's theology. Calvin says, "Scripture tells us first of all about who God is—His triune nature—and then Scripture tells us that it is this God who created all things. Then, Scripture tells us that it is this God who preserves and governs all that He has made." That is a quick summary of Book I.

In this lesson, we are going to look at Calvin's doctrine of God. Let us bow in prayer, and I will use a prayer from one of Calvin's sermons on 1 Samuel chapter 2. It is an appropriate prayer that we can use for this topic. Let us pray.

"Let us, therefore, bow before the majesty of our good God, recognizing the great number of faults and offenses with which we have provoked His wrath against us. Let us pray to Him that He may etch the fear of His majesty upon our minds and make us sharers in those things that we have learned in the Scripture, that by His strength He may support our weakness and infirmity and may make us victors by the power of His Spirit and provide sufficient strength for us to withstand any temptations to which we would otherwise be unequal and run the whole course of our lives in obedience to Him, giving thanks to Him for His many and great benefits to us. Finally, let all of our senses be lifted up in worshiping Him to His everlasting praise and glory and may we be led in the pathway of salvation, not for our own private advantage but for the building up of our neighbors. It is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen."

As we come to Calvin's doctrine of God, we see that he stresses first of all the agreement between what creation and Scripture teach us about God. We are still in Book I, so this is knowledge of God, the Creator. That knowledge was there—planted within us and placed before us. We would have been able to see it had we not sinned. But, because Adam did sin and that sin affected us, we cannot gain that knowledge from the creation. However, that knowledge, and more, is available to us in Scripture. It is more intimately and more vividly revealed in His Word.

The best text to use to describe what Calvin is talking about is Psalm 19:1, which says, "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands." We would have been able to see that by looking at the heavens if we had not sinned. Now, as Christians, we see that by looking at the heavens because the Bible has instructed us about God, the Creator, and His glory and the magnificence of His creation. Without Scripture and without the testimony of the Holy Spirit in his or her heart, an unregenerate person would look at the heavens and perhaps be impressed, amazed, or awed. However, his or her thoughts would not turn to the Creator, at least not in a clear way without error and superstition. So, the theology from nature and from providence recovered by the Word of God is still our possession. It is a useful part of the believer's knowledge of God, and it assists us in our Christian lives.

We can look at the heavens and see and worship God. So, there is knowledge of God, the Creator, from creation, given to us now through the Bible.

Calvin develops two main thoughts there: the existence and attributes of God and the orderly government of the universe. Both of those are reflected in Psalm 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God." God exists. He is a majestic God. The firmament showeth His handiwork. He has arranged things in a proper order, and He governs this universe by His will. This is the knowledge of God from creation through the Bible. However, as we come to the chapters we have for this lesson, Calvin tells us that the knowledge of God the Creator that we have in the Bible goes beyond what we had and lost in creation but is now recovered in the Bible. There are specific truths about God in the Bible only that we never would have learned from creation even if Adam had not sinned. One specific truth is the Trinity. As second is the doctrine of creation, not the fact of creation but the time and manner of the creation. We could have known that God was the Creator through natural revelation if we had not sinned. But, we could not have known the way God created—the time and the manner, how God did it—except through the Scripture. In our next lesson, we will also study God's creation not only of the heavens and the earth but also of the angels and the demons, His creation of humankind, and the original state of man and woman. If Adam had not sinned and we could have seen this generally through natural revelation, we would have seen the providence of God—the general ordering of the universe by God—but we would not have seen what Calvin calls "the full scope of God's particular providence."

I have been asked, "If Adam had not sinned and we would have received the knowledge of God through natural revelation, would we have known anything about the Trinity?" I think Calvin says no. That is not available to us through creation. Saint Augustine might disagree with that. I might comment on that in a few minutes. But, Calvin does not see any revelation of the Trinity in natural theology.

The question has been asked, "Would unfallen man ever have known anything about the Trinity?" I expect Calvin's answer is "We are getting into speculation." As far as he tells us in Book I of the *Institutes*, the Trinity is a specially revealed biblical doctrine. It is not somehow stamped on the face of the universe. You cannot look up at the stars and see a triune God. You can see a God, but you cannot see a triune God. As you look deep within yourself, you have a sense of the majesty of God, but you do not see a Trinity there. So, that understanding of God was placed within us and within creation, but not the full understanding of God that we now have in the Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity. That is about as far as I can go with my answer because I think Calvin would say, "To go further with unfallen mankind is speculative because that is not what happened. We are back in the real world of fallen humanity as Calvin deals with the facts of God, this knowledge of God that comes only from the Bible.

Second, I want to talk about characteristics of Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of God. We will learn some things about how Calvin views this doctrine and how he views every doctrine. First, Calvin places, as we expect, stress on Scripture and warns us against speculation. Calvin says, "The question is not, "What is God?"—*quid sit Deus* (Do not ask, "What is God?") That is the scholastic question, which wants to answer that with a very probing answer that gets into the very nature and existence of God. So, if we cannot ask, "What is God?" what can we ask? Calvin says, "What we ought to ask is, 'What kind of God is He?'"—*qualis sit Deus*. At first, that might not seem like much of a difference to us, but I think you will see the difference when you read a statement in Book I, chapter 10, part 2, which is a very characteristic statement from Calvin that God is shown to us not as He is in Himself but as He is toward us. We cannot really see God as He is in Himself. We do not really know God as He is in Himself. We cannot answer the question, "What is God?" But we can answer the question, "What kind of person has God revealed Himself to be?" The difference between these two questions is really a difference between

what God has revealed, which is ours to know, and what God has not revealed, which is not ours to know. God is shown to us not as He is in Himself but as He is toward us.

That is pretty characteristic and typical of Calvin's dealing with this question and all of theology. There is a limit, and we cannot go beyond that limit. People sometimes wonder and worry about this. If we cannot know God as He is in Himself, and we only know God as He is toward us, then are there two gods there? Could there be some sort of incompatibility between the revelation and the essence of God? Calvin never accepts that sort of situation. It is not that there are two gods or that the will or the essence of the hidden God might be quite different from the nature of the revealed God. It is better to see it this way: there is a hidden depth to God that we cannot know. Francis Schaeffer used to say quite often, "We can know God truly, but we cannot know God exhaustively." I think that is what Calvin is saying here. We know God truly. What we know of God is true knowledge of God. We are not deceived by that. But, we cannot penetrate into the secret things of God, and so we should not try. That is Calvin's warning against speculation. He says, "Here indeed"—that is, in the study of the doctrine of God—"if anywhere, in the secret mysteries of Scripture"—especially in this quotation from Book I, Chapter 13, part 21 talking about the Trinity—"we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation."

So, we do not go beyond what we are allowed to know from the Scripture. When Calvin is talking about God and especially the doctrine of the Trinity, he confines himself to Scripture, although we will see that he is willing to use non-scriptural words that the Christian tradition has developed (Council of Nicaea and other church councils.) As appropriate, we will talk about why Calvin used these non-biblical words. He does not want to go beyond Scripture, and he confines himself (as much as he possibly can) to the very words of Scripture. For that reason, you do not find in Calvin illustrations of the Trinity. He does not feel that the Bible has given us illustrations of the Trinity, so he does not give us proofs or illustrations from metaphysical reasoning or from natural analogies or from psychological analogies. Saint Augustine does. Saint Augustine goes beyond Calvin and sees something of the nature of the Trinity stamped in the very psychological processes of our thinking. It is a very complicated argument. Calvin almost always follows Augustine but not at this point. He says, "Comparisons from human affairs are inadequate." So, we are warned against speculation. As he stresses the importance of using all the Scripture but not going beyond it in our understanding of God, Calvin also reminds us again that knowledge of God is not that knowledge that he explained earlier. It is that knowledge that just flits in the brain. True knowledge of God invites us first to fear and then to trust in Him. So, Calvin cannot get very far into his treatment of the doctrine of the knowledge of God before he starts talking about loving, fearing, obeying, and worshipping God. In fact, that is the next topic.

Not only is there stress on Scripture, but there is also stress on worship. This is quite characteristic of Calvin. He is going to talk about God—what kind of God his is. But, before he says almost anything about that, he says, "We must worship God. We must love God. We must obey God." He is putting into practice that principle that he has already established—that knowledge of God is not pure, objective knowledge out there. It is not balancing opinions about God or making nice, metaphysical statements about Him. We learn about God from reading the Scripture, of course. However, we learn about God on our knees. So, let us talk about worship.

It may appear that Calvin introduced a topic here that seems to fit later, but when you see what he is doing, it is pretty impressive that Calvin cannot talk about God without talking about worship. Chapters 11 and 12 are on the worship of God, and then chapter 13 is on the Trinity. So, worship, in Calvin's arrangement, comes even before the very difficult treatment of the Trinity. True and acceptable worship is a basic ingredient of the knowledge of God. In Book I, chapter 10, part 2, Calvin says, "Recognition of Him consists more in living experience than in vain and high-flown speculation." Also in Book I,

chapter 10, part 2, he says, "Knowledge of God in Scripture invites us first to fear God and then to trust in Him." So, you get many of these statements at the beginning of Calvin's treatment of God concerning the importance of worshipping God.

As Calvin gets into this, he describes both acceptable and unacceptable worship. Acceptable worship is worship that follows what God teaches. In Book I, chapter 11, part 1, God teaches what worship He approves or repudiates. So, God not only tells us to worship Him, but tells us how to worship Him. What do we usually call this? It is the regulative principle. This is one expression of the regulative principle in Calvin—that is, we are not free to worship God any way we choose. God has given us directions as to how we are to worship Him. That is acceptable worship, the Reformed principle or the regulative principle. You can use either expression to that. Then, Calvin contrasts that with unacceptable worship, and the particular concern that he has in unacceptable worship is that it is unlawful to attribute a visible form to God. Generally, whoever sets up idols revolts against the true God. That is the title of chapter 11. So, Calvin says, "True worship is according to the pattern that God has established in His Word."

False worship would be using idols. Calvin is thinking here about idolatry and primarily images in Roman Catholic worship. He really does not make a distinction between idolatry and the use of images in worship. He knows how the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church would be similar in this—how a distinction is made between *dulia* and *latria*. *Dulia* is the respectful service or the kind of adoration that is proper to give to images of the saints, or of Mary, or even of Christ. Calvin knows the distinction between *dulia* and *latria*, but he calls that the foolish evasion of the papists. He does not think much of that distinction, even though he says the papists justify the use of images by using a different word as to what kind of worship and adoration is being given to them as opposed to the true worship of God. It is a kind of semi-worship versus a full worship. Calvin is not impressed by that. His treatment here is rather strict and straightforward in that he says that we are not to use images in our worship of God.

Why does Calvin say that we are not to use images in our worship of God? There are three reasons. The first is because they are not allowed. God Himself has forbidden it (Book I, chapter 11, part 12). And, of course, Calvin's main proof of this is the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20:4, God forbids the making of graven images. So, worship of God through the use of images is not allowed. Second, it is not worthy of God. Book I, Chapter 11, part 6 says, "Bodily images are unworthy of God's majesty because they diminish the fear of Him in men and increase error." You cannot have a picture, image, or icon that is worthy of God. These just decrease the majesty of God, not increase it. Calvin says, "The use of these images in worship cannot be done without some defacing of His glory." Calvin points out that there are, you might say, symbols of God's heavenly glory in the Bible. But, what are those symbols? Some of the symbols include clouds, smoke, and flames. These symbols preserve the incomprehensibility of God. They do not deface the glory of God by something inferior and inadequate. The flames, smoke, and clouds preserve the mystery of God and His incomprehensibility. The use of images is not allowed, not worthy, and—Calvin says—not needed. We do not need these images.

One argument on the part of those who advocated the use of images was that these are the books of the unlearned so that the church could be full of images and pictures of various kinds because people need those images. People are unlearned, and these images help them to know something of what the Bible is all about. Calvin says if the church had been doing its business, these unlearned would not be unlearned. In Book I, chapter 11, part 7, he has a very strong statement, which I call "the praise of preaching." Calvin says, "We need sermons, not pictures"—the praise of preaching. Paul testifies that, by the true preaching of the Gospel, Christ is depicted before our eyes as crucified. We do not need a crucifix on the wall. We need a sermon about the crucifixion of Christ, and that is the proper way, the legitimate way,

the God-ordained way of setting forth what we need to see. Christ is depicted before our eyes as crucified. Then, we have the sacraments. We have the wonderful pictures of the sacraments—both living and symbolic images—in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

I remember reading once when I was studying to write the history of Princeton Seminary about Dr. Alexander, the first president and professor at Princeton. Before that, Alexander was a Presbyterian preacher in Virginia. On one occasion, Dr. Alexander was preaching the "action" sermon, as it used to be called, before the receiving of the Lord's Supper. The table was prepared. Alexander was in a high pulpit somewhere in Virginia. As he preached about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, he leaned over the pulpit, looked down at the table, and said, "There is the lamb" to the bread and the wine on the table. Some man way up in the gallery stood up so he could see at that point. He wanted to see it. That is what Calvin is talking about when he says, "In the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper we have these living and symbolic images."

Now, Calvin does do something else here that is very important in this section. He talks about the proper use of art. Calvin has eliminated the use of art in worship, but he says, "There is a pure and legitimate use of art." Sculpture and painting are gifts of God. Not everybody picks up on this from Calvin. Calvin had a reputation of being a person who was out to destroy beautiful things. He certainly wanted to remove the images from the churches and turn people's eyes to the Word and to sacraments, but Calvin was not opposed to art (Book I, chapter 11, part 7). Calvin says there are two legitimate uses for art. One is for history and event—that is painting or using sculpture to illustrate some event that has taken place in history. That is a very proper use of art. It teaches us and admonishes us as these stories are set forth. They can be biblical or non-biblical. It is not improper to paint a picture of Joshua and the wall of Jericho falling down or some event in secular history.

What is quite surprising, though, is that Calvin says there is some art beyond that—he calls it forms of bodies. He says, "I do not see what they can afford other than pleasure." To some people, that is the most uncharacteristically-sounding Calvin statement. Calvin says, "Some things that are legitimate to paint do not teach us anything. They just give us pleasure. We enjoy looking at beautiful things." When he says that we can enjoy art that does not teach and admonish but just gives pleasure, he does not mean that art can be lascivious or that it can set forth pictures of nudity in a lascivious way. In fact, Calvin criticizes many of the Roman Catholic images as being obscene—pictures of the Virgin Mary, for instance. He says, "Brothels show harlots clad more virtuously and modestly than the churches show those objects which they wish to be thought images of the Virgin." So, he has certain constraints there. It is not just prudishness but concern that art be not only legitimate but also positive and helpful. In his writing, *Calvin's Doctrine of God*, B. B. Warfield talks about this material that I have just been discussing, and he says, "Calvin was a lover and fosterer of the arts." I wish I could say that. I think Warfield is a little overly enthusiastic at that point. But, we can certainly say that Calvin was not an enemy of art as such. There was a place for art, a pure and legitimate use for art.

The question has been asked, "What would Calvin have thought about a picture of Christ?" I expect Calvin would have opposed that. That gets into a big debate, which Calvin does not really enter into. That debate was particularly focused in the Eastern part of the church, the iconoclastic controversy. My guess is that Calvin would say that we cannot depict Christ because we cannot depict the two natures. You see, he tells us that what we should do in art is to paint only those things that our eyes are capable of seeing (Book I, chapter 11, part 12). And because we cannot see God, we cannot paint a picture of God. Can we paint a picture of Christ? There were plenty of people in the Eastern Church, like John of Damascus, who said, "If Christ was a real person, then we can paint Him as a person." It was important to some of these theologians that the reality of the human nature of Christ be set forth in pictures. One

answer that was given to that was “If we paint the human nature of Christ, how do we paint it? How should He be depicted? What should He look like?” We do not have any record, in art or in words, of the physical appearance of Jesus. But, I expect Calvin would have been more concerned about the fact that when you paint a picture of Christ, you are painting only one nature. Medieval artists tried to get around this by painting halos. The halos depicted the other nature, but that seemed to be a weak way of depicting both natures. Of course, people in the Eastern part of the church would say, “We are not depicting either nature alone. We are depicting the person. How did people in Jesus’ time see Him? Did they see the two natures? No, they saw the person.” That brings us back to the first question, and that is, “What then should He look like?” If there had been photography back then and we had pictures of Christ, what would we do with them? Calvin would probably say that God saw to it that we did not have photography back then because we would have misused those in some way. The Shroud of Turin is perhaps the closest we get to something like this, and that is not only very controversial but also very problematic in its use.

Let us move on to the attributes of God. As I have already said, there is a stress in Calvin on God as He is toward us. However, Calvin will admit that there is a brief mention in the Bible from time to time of God as He is in Himself. For instance, Calvin says in Book I, chapter 13, part 1, “God speaks sparingly of His essence.” When we think of the essence of God, we think of God’s eternity and God’s self-existence (Book I, chapter 10, part 2). We think of His infinity and His spirituality (Book I, chapter 13, part 1). We could say that all of these words point to the essence of God, but even these qualities function to limit our understanding of God. Calvin says, “The word ‘infinity,’ for instance, ought to make us afraid to try to measure Him by our own senses.” When we say, “God is infinite,” what are we saying about God except that we should not try to limit Him in any way? When we say that God is spiritual, that forbids our imagining anything earthly or carnal of Him. So, let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of Himself. Once again, that is just saying what I said already—that God as He is in Himself is not an area that we can explore. We leave that to God willingly, Calvin says. However, there is much that we do know about God from the Bible.

What kind of God is He? Calvin deals pretty briefly with this. Actually, Calvin uses two brief Bible studies to talk about the attributes of God. In later theology, we will get into this in a very complicated way with communicable attributes and incommunicable attributes and all kinds of lists and divisions. But, Calvin does not do that. He simply takes us to Exodus 34:6-7 and to Psalm 145, which tell us what we know about God. Those two texts reveal something about God’s attributes. B. B. Warfield puts it well when he says that in Calvin’s treatment the attributes of God are present, so to speak, in solution rather than in precipitant. In other words, when looking at God, the attributes are in solution. They are not pulled out, lined up, or outlined in precipitant. If you want to see the difference, read Birkhoff on the attributes of God. There you get it in precipitant. It is pulled out, arranged, and outlined—
incommunicable attributes: self-existence, immutability, infinity, unity; communicable attributes: spirituality; intellectual attributes, moral attributes, attributes of sovereignty, and all of those have sub-points too. But, in Calvin, God’s attributes are in solution.

I want to make a point not just about this section of the *Institutes* but all of the *Institutes*. Calvin places a lot of emphasis on the sovereignty of God. This is not a missing element in Calvin’s work. Sometimes people think that is the key element in Calvin. But, there is an even stronger emphasis on God’s love. You do not really see Calvin as such talking about the sovereignty of God just like that. He says things like, “Our Father who is sovereign” or “Our God who loves us and cares for us who is the sovereign God.” He links the two together—fatherly sovereign and sovereign Father. I think that is important to remember not only that Calvin does it but that we should do it too. It is not just the sovereignty of God;

it is the love and sovereignty of God. When we say, "God is sovereign," we should also say, "God is our heavenly Father," so that these two concepts of God are brought together.

Book I, chapter 11, part 12 deals with worship. It is directed to Christians in order to enable us to know how to worship God. Actually, it is not until Book IV that we get to the formal worship of God in the church. We will come back to all of that at that point, but Calvin cannot wait until Book IV to get this in. As soon as he starts talking about God, he talks about worship. The particular direction that those chapters go is twofold: to lead us to know how to worship God and to reject the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox understanding of the use of images in the worship of God.

Book I, chapter 13 talks about the doctrine of the Trinity. Here, Calvin wants to set forth the Bible's positive treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity and also reject the anti-trinitarian views that were prevalent in his day. From this point on in Book I, Calvin deals with God the Creator not derived from creation via the Scripture but found, as we said earlier, solely in the Scripture. Calvin says, "The doctrine of the Trinity is another special mark to distinguish Himself more precisely from idols." This connects this chapter to the two that precede it. Idols or images are not triune. Only God is triune. Calvin is concerned to assert that apart from a trinitarian view of God, we do not really know God. If we do not know that God is Trinity, then we do not know God. It is only through His self-revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we learn what God's true nature is. Calvin does not say it here or anywhere else as far as I know, but that would mean that the god the Jews worship and Allah of the Muslims are not God because they are not Trinity. We can only know God as we know Him as triune.

I want to give you some background on this. By 1559, Calvin had been through a lot of battles on this issue. The 1559 version of the *Institutes* has much more in this chapter than the 1536 edition did. Calvin had struggled with opponents on this. Pierre Caroli is one. Servetus, who was burned for his anti-trinitarian errors in Geneva, is another. Through all of those debates and struggles, Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity developed. It is not that his ideas shifted. He was, what we would say, an "Orthodox trinitarian" in 1536, and he was an Orthodox trinitarian in 1559. By 1559, he had borne the scars of many battles over this issue. The doctrine of the Trinity was an issue in the sixteenth century among some of the Radicals of the Reformation. So, Calvin had much more to say about it by 1559.

Let me say a little about Calvin's terminology here. There are two currents in Calvin's thought, and we have to hold to both of them. One is the value of technical terms already in use derived from the church councils and from theological use related to the doctrine of the Trinity. Even the word "Trinity" is such a word. It is not in the Bible. The word "in person" is used to speak of the three persons. There is also a Greek word and a Latin word for that. The Greek expression *homoousios* means "the same substance with the Father"; it came from the Council of Nicaea in 325. Should Christians use all of those terms, or is that bringing in Greek philosophical language and non-biblical baggage to complicate what would be much easier without them? Well, Calvin says we can use them. He says, "We need not confine ourselves to the exact words of the Bible." As Warfield puts it, "For Calvin, the sense of Scripture, and not the words of Scripture, is Scripture." That might seem heretical at first. Calvin holds to plenary verbal inspiration as I said earlier. However, you can take the words of Scripture and develop all kinds of heresies like the Jehovah's Witnesses do. They quote Scripture. They use the words of Scripture. But, it is the sense of Scripture that is Scripture, not the isolated words of Scripture. Another way to say it is that it is all of Scripture that is Scripture, not one text alone. So, Calvin comes to embrace the use of these technical terms. He says, "Avoidance of this traditional language may indicate a secret poison." Some people say, "We just want to be biblical and not use these theological terms." Why are they saying that? Is it because they want to be biblical or are they hiding a secret poison? The anti-trinitarians were the people who would do this. The Arians were people who would do this. Jesus said, "My father is

greater than I," which shows that Jesus is not God but is on a secondary level. So, you can take a text of the Bible and develop a heresy from it. In fact, every heresy comes from some text of the Bible. It is the sense of Scripture that Calvin is concerned about. Certain heretics such as Arius have used scriptural language to affirm non-biblical concepts of God, so we must refute their errors by using these theological statements in order to make the truth plain and clear. Well, that is one stream in Calvin's thought.

The other stream is freedom to formulate doctrine independent of traditional statements. At first, Calvin did not want to use these statements. He did not want to be forced to affirm his faith in the language of the Council of Nicaea. He soon realized that, because he was hesitant to do that, people accused him of being Arian. He began to get the point that it is one thing to say, "I am just going to be biblical. I am not going to use the creeds and confessions because these are the efforts of people to put forth the truth of the Bible." Calvin also realized that these efforts of people to put forth the truth of the Bible were legitimate efforts in some cases. Everything had to be tested, of course. These words were not words that were foolishly words and could be used with good effect. However, at the same time, he still wanted to feel freedom. Substance of doctrine must have priority over any formulation of it, Calvin would say. He says, "Indeed, I could wish they were buried"—that is, these creedal statements—"if only among all men this faith were agreed on." Then, he goes on to set forth the statement of the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. People just believed in the doctrine of the Trinity—that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. They are equally God, but they are three persons eternally existing within the one Godhead. If people just believed that then we would not have to use "Trinity," "in person," "*homoousios*," and so on.

Calvin does give us a number of statements concerning our understanding of the Trinity. One is in Book I, chapter 13, part 5 and says, "Father and Son and Spirit are one God yet the Son is not the Father nor the Spirit the Son, but they are differentiated by a peculiar quality." You can find quite a few of these summary statements where Calvin will try to set forth the Christian Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in just a sentence or two. He then sets forth arguments to support these statements. He is basically arguing that in the unity of the Godhead there are distinctions and subsistence of persons. He argues for the full deity of the Son. The Son is God (Book I, chapter 13, parts 7-13.) I will not go through those arguments, but they are well known, and we still use them to prove the deity of Christ. He then goes through the same list to set forth the deity of the Holy Spirit in Book I, chapter 13, parts 14-15.

As any Orthodox trinitarian, he needs to, wants to, and must establish two things: God is one. There are distinctions within the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), not divisions. In God, there is a certain disposition or economy that does not in any way affect the oneness of His being. Calvin says something that we all know and that is that this defies human analysis or comprehension. A Christian has to believe in one God, not three gods. We are not tri-theist. Some people think we are, but we are not. We believe in one God, but we also believe that there are distinctions within that one God, which lead us to an understanding of three persons. It is not a distinction in being. Each is fully God. The Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, and the Holy Spirit is fully God. Calvin is particularly careful in emphasizing this point. At times, the Christian tradition has been a little unsure about this even after Nicaea, at least in the way it was expressed. However, Calvin insists that each is fully God. The Son is God of himself (auto-theos), not just God from the Father. He is the Son of the Father, but He is not God from the Father. He is God of Himself as the Holy Spirit is God of Himself. These are not distinctions in being nor are they distinctions in time. The Arians had said of the Son, "There was a time that he was not," but Orthodox theology says, "The Son is eternal just as the Father is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal." The distinction is as persons within the Godhead in which there is a significant and irreversible order: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not Holy Spirit, Son, and Father. The Father is the fountain of deity

with respect not to being but to order. The Father is the “fountain of deity” (that is traditional, theological language in Calvin’s time). That does not mean that the deity of the Son flows from the Father. The deity of the Son flows from Himself. And, the deity of the Holy Spirit flows from Himself. So, we are not talking about deity when we talk about the Father being the fountain of deity, but we are talking about order.

Calvin stresses the fact that one of the persons of the Trinity involves knowledge of the other two at the same time. I think he would reject the conventional division of labor within the Godhead, which says the Father is the Creator, the Son is the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier. Now, we are in Book I, “Knowledge of God, the Creator,” but when we talk about knowledge of God, the Creator, we are not just talking about the Father. We are talking about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the one God who is the Creator. You will notice as we come to Book II that the title of it is “Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ.” He does not say, “Knowledge of Christ the Redeemer,” but “knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ” because it is God who is our Redeemer—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is God who is our Sanctifier—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity as a whole, not each of the persons separately, is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Having said that, Calvin is still willing and eager (he feels it very necessary) to embrace these distinctions within the Godhead. The Father is the beginning and the fountain. The Son is wisdom, counsel, ordered disposition of all things. The Spirit is power and efficacy of that activity. Nothing can obscure the unity of the Godhead, but at the same time, it is not fitting to suppress these distinctions, which he thinks are made by Scripture. When things are at their most complex in Calvin’s discussion of this, he comes to a quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus. By the way, a lot of his trinitarian thought reflects the thought of this Eastern theologian. He was called a theologian. He was one of the great Cappadocians. He was one of the two Gregories in Capadocia, which is modern-day Turkey. Gregory of Nazianzus was very much similar to Calvin. Calvin drew often from Gregory in his trinitarian thought. He says, “This passage from Gregory vastly delights me.” He just loves this passage. You can see Calvin smiling as he writes this down. The passage from Gregory said, “I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three, nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.” So, as soon as you think of the oneness of God then you are thinking of the three-ness. Then, as you begin to think about the three-ness, you are carried back to the oneness. It is really Christian Orthodoxy. You just move back and forth. Whoever stopped would become heretics—either Unitarians or tri-theists. We moved back and forth. Calvin gives a defense of this—a justification of polemics. He says, “The truth, which has been peaceably shown, must be maintained against the calumnies of the wicked.” This is the antithetical structuring of the *Institutes* that I spoke about in the first lesson. Calvin not only positively sets forth what the Scripture teaches but feels that it is also important to reject that which is false. Therefore, he gives a defense of the doctrine of the Trinity against the anti-trinitarians, especially Servetus. Servetus’ theology was anti-trinitarian. It was a strange and logically impossible mixture of Sabellianism and Arianism. I will not unpack that for you, but if you think about that, a Sabellian cannot be an Arian and an Arian cannot be a Sabellian, but Servetus was both. Carol Bray, in the book *The Doctrine of God*, talks about the logically impossible view of Servetus.

I want to come to the evaluation during our last four minutes. Warfield says, “The notes of Calvin’s conception of the Trinity are simplification, clarification, and equalization.” I think that is well put. Calvin’s great contribution was the equalization, because in medieval tradition, despite what had been established earlier in the church councils, the Father was recognized as the source of divinity in a way in which the other two persons were not. Calvin insists on the consubstantiality of the persons. Whatever the Father is as God, the Son is as God and the Holy Spirit is as God. Calvin insists on the self-existence

of the Son. Sometimes we use the word *aseity*. The Greek expression is *autotheos*. The Son is God in His own right, not merely by divine appointment. The Son does not get His divinity from the Father. He is God in Himself. The deity of the Son exists absolutely of itself. The Son is God and exists of Himself, and the Holy Spirit is God and exists of Himself. The Son as Son exists of the Father. God is God in Himself, but He is Father in relation to the Son. The second person of the Trinity, the Son, is God in Himself. He is Son in relation to the Father. The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is God in Himself. He is Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son.

One further point is that the creed speaks of the Son as being God from God. That language can lead astray. Calvin wants to be sure that any hint of causality latent in terminology like that as far as the deity of the Son is concerned be eliminated. Also, Calvin is concerned with the idea from Nicaea of the Son being begotten of the Father before all ages. It is not that Calvin rejects the concept of the eternal generation of the Son. He thinks that is a proper way to set forth the distinction between the Father and Son, but he says in Book I, chapter 13, part 29, "For what is the point in disputing whether the Father always begets. Indeed, it is foolish to imagine a continuous act of begetting since it is clear that three persons have subsisted in God from eternity." Calvin is not rejecting the eternal generation but seeing the generation of the Son as an eternal act, an ongoing generation as opposed to an eternally completed act. It is not that the Son receives anything of the Father as a continuous emanation. That act of generation, which is simply a way of speaking of distinction between the Father and Son, is something that is done and should not be considered something that continues. What is the point in disputing whether or not the Father always begets? Calvin says, "Yes, the Father beget the Son." That does not have anything to do with time or subordination. It is simply a word that the church has used to set forth the difference between the Father and Son as the word "procession" or "precedes" is used to set forth the difference between the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son. Calvin is not opposing Nicaea, but he cannot see that "eternal generation" means something that always keeps on going. It is a description of something that is eternally true but not an ongoing activity. We will look at creation next time.