

Coherence and Incoherence in the Theology of John Calvin
by
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John Leith was generous in asking me to attend this by now, I believe, annual meeting of those to whom the study of John Calvin is important. He was even more generous in asking me to present one of the papers. I am grateful to him for providing the nudge to put down some observations and reflections about that Genevan reformer whose theological work engaged me thoroughly at the beginning of my efforts to be a theologian and who has continued over more years than I like to count to amaze, puzzle, irritate, challenge, and enlighten me.

It is now nearly twenty-five years since my book, Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority, was published. In the intervening years I have written nothing further on Calvin, although I have referred to him often in publications on other subjects, and aspects of his thought have been a significant factor in molding the perspective from which I make theological judgments, whether they be an accompaniment of the analysis of texts by others or part of a constructive effort.

Like many before our time, like some of us today, and, I hope, like a venerable company yet to come, I found and still find the Institutes to be a classic text. By "classic" I mean that it is not only an astonishing accomplishment whose historical effect has been notable. It is also a text that yields more with every reflective reading.

By rough estimate, my copies of the Institutes have fifteen strata of marginal notes. Even in these last nearly seven years, when I have been preoccupied with administration and have had to reduce my teaching to one offering a year, I have continued to read through the Institutes with students in alternate years. I cannot claim any longer to be abreast of the literature about Calvin, but I can observe that every incarnation of the Calvin seminar produces a new strata of marginalia and new thoughts about Calvin for possible further development. The text, indeed, is a classic.

I would not have been so foolhardy as to accept John Leith's invitation had he not proposed that I reflect about my book after all these years. That proposal seemed manageable to me, but as I began to formulate a thought or two I concluded that a new investigation in continuity with the earlier work would likely be more interesting and that a combination of historical-theological and systematic-theological concerns would be more productive of good discussion. I have decided, therefore, to treat the difficult problem of eternal election, analyzing Calvin's discussion of the subject in continuity with my earlier work and proposing the following thesis: The difficulties the modern reader has with Calvin's teaching on eternal election are caused by Calvin's reliance on the scripture principle, a principle which is no longer tenable on historical or theological grounds. If, however, today that principle presumes to found a more extensive knowledge than is warranted, in Calvin's time, at least on this subject, the scripture principle, as he employed

it, functioned as a definite limit to human knowledge, leaving and even demanding a broad range for agnosticism. If one removes the scripture principle from the structure of Calvin's theology but tries to remain consistent with his intentions, the result is not the possibility of modifications of our alterations to his view of the divine will or plan but an extension of the range of agnosticism. Not only are the loss of the scripture principle and this expanded agnosticism no threat to Calvin's understanding of faith and salvation; they also contribute to and extend a coherent and understandable theological position.

I. The Sources for the Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology

Calvin's most exhaustive biographer, Emil Doumergue, judges that Calvin was a man "tormented by an incomparable need for certitude."¹ The judgment is understandable. Calvin intended in the Institutes to give an ordered presentation of what human beings can know about God, and a casual reading draws the eyes to focus repeatedly on the phrase, "It is certain" Even more notably, one observes a pervasive assurance and the never-failing claim that apparent difficulties can be readily resolved, an aspect of Calvin's demeanor that tends to alienate many present-day students who, infused with vague notions of relativity and generally aware of a world far more extensive and diverse than Calvin knew, innately believe no knowledge can be so secure.

Doumergue's judgment, however, obscures three considerations that are also important in reading Calvin. First, to speak of Calvin's obsession with certainty inevitably causes one to focus on his conviction that the Bible as a whole is true. But in this certainty he does not differ from most in his own time and before in Christianized Europe. Second, to put such an emphasis on Calvin's "need for certainty" is likely to cause the reader to picture him as one who wants to know everything, a kind of Faustian figure. And so he may seem to a modern student whose historical sense is undeveloped and who is aware of how little we can know for certain. But in his historical context the scripture principle functioned for Calvin as a limit to knowledge. We are certain, he held, of this much and no more, and in this position he disallowed "spiritual" exegesis. With this consideration we see in Calvin a theologian whose range of knowledge was not nearly as broad as that of his counterparts in the Roman Church. Third, and most important, Doumergue's judgment, by causing us to focus on the objective knowledge Calvin thought he found in the Bible, causes us also to neglect the relational knowledge of God (faith), in which the knowledge of God can never be divorced from the knowledge of self.

This is the theme with which Calvin begins the Institutes, to which he repeatedly alludes, which he brings to a focus at the beginning of Book III, and which he admits, because this knowledge cannot be divorced from our fickle and fallible selves, is a knowledge "not unattended by doubt" (III, ii, 17; tangatur dubitatione, OS IV, 27, 27)² and even unbelief (III, ii, 15, 17, 18, 21, 24, 37). What is of the utmost interest and a problem for reflection that can have the most remarkable issue is to see that Doumergue's judgment only obscures this third consideration. Strictly speaking, Doumergue is still right. Calvin's admission

of a measure of doubt and unbelief comes in the context of his explanation of what he means by stating that faith is a "firm and certain knowledge" (III, ii, 7, et passim; firmam certamque cognitionem, OS IV, 16, 33).

It will be noted in what I have said that I find two separate and distinct sources for the knowledge of God in Calvin's work. One source is objective. I call it objective because it is contained in an object, the Bible, and because the knowledge it yields represents God as an object about whom and whose plan and acts information is given. The Bible informs us³ about God. It tells us what we otherwise could not know with certainty.

The other source for the knowledge of God in Calvin's thought is relational. I call it relational because the knowledge is secured only when the subject is joined to the object and in such a way that the appropriate form of sentences includes reference both to the object and to the subject. Its classic statement is in Calvin's definition of faith: "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 upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed in our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (III, ii, 7; OS IV, 16, 31-35). The coupling of object and subject in this definition is consistent with the mode of speech Calvin began to use intensively at the beginning of Book III. It recalls, however, the language of the first two chapters of the Institutes where Calvin mulls over the inter-connection of the knowledge of God and knowledge of self in trying to determine a place to begin.

Almost every sentence in the first chapter alludes both to ourselves and to God, moving first from the one to the other (I, i, 1) and then from the other to the one (I, i, 2), declaring at the end that "the order of right teaching" requires that we begin with the knowledge of God (I, i, 3). In the first paragraph: "No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thought to the contemplation of God." And: "Our very poverty discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God." In the second paragraph: "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face." It appears that theology is at the same time anthropology, and vice-versa.

This coupling of the knowledge of God and self pervades the rhetoric of the second chapter as well. "Now the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him" (I, ii, 1; OS III, 34, 6-9). It appears that all Christology is at the same time soteriology and vice-versa. Indeed, a bare knowledge of God--we may say, a purely informational knowledge of God--is of no avail: "It will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in Him" (I, ii, 1; OS, III, 34, 27-30). "What help is it in short to know a God with whom we have nothing to

do?" (I, II, 2; OS III, 35, 16-17). This question explains the difference between the useless question, "What is God?" (Quod sit Deus?) and the theologically appropriate question, "Of what sort is God?" (Qualis sit Deus?) (I, II, 2; OS III, 35, 12, 13). That is, how is God to us? Thus the proper knowledge of God couples with piety which Calvin understands as "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (I, II, 1; OS III, 35, 4-5).

One would think that this kind of language should lead Calvin directly to the subject matter of faith where the distance between God or Christ and human beings collapses by action of the Holy Spirit and what God has done in Christ is salvifically appropriated. That does not happen, however, and the reason is given in the requirement of piety in Chapter II. The pious mind, we are told, not only "acknowledges" God as "Lord" and "Father" (note the difference in the confessions, "There is a God" and "You are my God") but also "deems it meet and right to observe his authority (imperium) in all things" (I, II, 2; OS III, 36, 18-19), admitting "that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause" (I, II, 1; OS III, 34, 34-37). In short, the scripture principle intervenes, that which was given in Calvin's time even though he tried to use it more strictly and in a more limiting way than most in his day and before.

The scripture principle introduces a different mode of the knowledge of God and a different kind of rhetoric. Now we are dealing with what is true without respect to its appropriation. It is what even the devils know. To be sure, this knowledge limits us to God's deeds and plan, not granting humankind a knowledge of the essence of God, but it is nonetheless a knowledge that one can, so to speak, look at, and any connection with "us," as Calvin most often uses that word, is only by inference or by considering "ourselves" as instances of humankind.

II. Coherence and Incoherence in the Sources for the Knowledge of God

In trying to establish this source for the knowledge of God, Calvin raises severe problems for the modern reader that in almost all cases would not have bothered the sixteenth century reader:

The less severe problem is, one might say, esthetic, though it is not without substance. As an explanation of the certainty of the knowledge of God in the Bible, Calvin, as we know, refers to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. In the sixth chapter of the first book, after the opening discussion of where to begin and after asserting the availability but, finally, the unreliability of the natural knowledge of God, he claims that a certain knowledge of God requires that it come directly from God and that it be free of any human element. We have this source in scripture. "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 through the audacity of men" (I, VI, 3; OS III, 63, 18-20). As a confirmation of this divine source, Calvin points in Chapter VII to the Holy Spirit as the author and confirmer of scripture.

Here is the esthetic problem. Given the careful ordering of material in the Institutes, one must observe that the introduction of the Holy Spirit at this place is a disturbance of good order. The structure of the Institutes is clear. By the one way of viewing it, it sets forth the two-fold knowledge of God (duplex cognitio Dei), first God the Creator (Book I) and then God the Redeemer (Books II-IV). From this view of the structure the doctrine of the Holy Spirit belongs under the overarching doctrine of God the Redeemer. By another way of viewing it, the Institutes follows the structure of the Apostles' Creed. Accordingly Book I treats God the Creator; Book II, Christ; Book III, the Holy Spirit; and Book IV, the church. Again, a discussion of the Holy Spirit in Book I seems misplaced.

This esthetic problem, to be sure, is partially resolved if one views the first nine chapters as not properly a part of Book I but as prolegomena in which Calvin set forth his mode of proceeding and his source. That explanation has cogency, but it alters the designation Calvin himself provided.

More troublesome is the circularity Calvin must claim for the activity of the Spirit in order to establish in scripture a source for the knowledge of God that is beyond all doubt. First the Spirit speaks through the writers of the Bible, and then it testifies to us internally that it has done so. Calvin acknowledges that this representation is beyond reason. It must, he thinks, be so in order to be secure. "The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason (omni ratione praestantius esse). For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance (reperiet) in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade (ut persuadeat) us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded" (I, vii, 4; OS III, 70, 1-8). The circle is tight, and it is arbitrary, as it must be in order to establish the certainty of scripture. Consequently the doctrine is thoroughly formal: we are presented with what is necessary in order for scripture to be an infallible source. The Bible is not the writers' work but God's through the Holy Spirit; if we receive it as such it is not our perceptiveness but the Holy Spirit telling us that it is so.

It is not that Calvin does not know the tough questions. As a matter of fact, he takes note of them: "Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our very day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another. . . ?" (I, vii, 1; OS III, 65, 24, 66, 1). But he can only deny these questions; he cannot consider them. Nor should we think he deals with them in Chapter viii: "So Far as Human Reason Goes, Sufficiently Firm Proofs Are at Hand to Establish the Credibility of Scripture." The "proofs" are circular, spurious, and determined by the conclusion that is known in advance. Calvin must admit at the end that "of themselves" they "are not strong enough to provide a firm faith" (I, viii, 13; OS III, 81, 20-21). He notes this not because he knows the arguments are weak but because certainty would be endangered if any element of human reason, any impulse

of intelligere were admitted into the arena. Intelligere is the arena of discussion; "firm faith" is possible only when "reverence for Scripture" has been lifted "beyond the realm of controversy" (I, viii, 13; OS III, 81, 22). The acceptance of scripture as a certain source for the knowledge of God, as Calvin takes it, is an arbitrary act which Calvin removes from the human will by attributing it to the Holy Spirit. However acceptable that view may have been in the sixteenth century, it is difficult to see how it can be other than deeply troublesome in the twentieth.

The rhetoric that follows from this position is thoroughly consistent. Scripture, because it is the product of God through the Holy Spirit, calls for a response of obedience, assent, and docility. By these terms he means accepting as true without question, taking upon oneself the demeanor of a child who learns from its parents what is right and true without understanding why. The truth is given from outside, and however much Calvin may emphasize that the testimony of the Spirit is internal and however thoroughly one might come to accept it as true, it is difficult to see how this appropriation can contribute to human integrity. But then, when Calvin proposes being an "integer" as the primal and, by implication, the salvific condition, he is writing about what I have called relational knowledge (I, ii, 1; OS III, 34, 13-17).

The language Calvin uses for the Holy Spirit in this seventh chapter is mixed in its valence. On the one side he can state that scripture "seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit" (I, vii, 5; OS III, 70, 21-22). This language seems appropriate to the Spirit, but it is difficult to put together with terms, on the other side, such as "subdue" and "compel" (I, vii, 4; OS III, 69, 23-24). These latter words correspond better to the objective character of the knowledge that is given, but they do not fit well with the phrases, "the secret testimony of the Spirit" (arcano testimonio Spiritus, I, vii, 4; OS III, 69, 11) and "the inward testimony of the Spirit" (interiore Spiritus testimonio, I, vii, 4; OS III, 70, 4-5). The difficulties mount.

This set of difficulties does not appear in the concentrated discussion in III, i and following of the relational source for the knowledge of God. The activity of the Holy Spirit in that connection is discussed in its appropriate place. Moreover, it is not presented in an arbitrary and circular way but in coherence with the determination of life in the one who has faith. In addition, the language describing the activity and effects of the Spirit is what one would expect to go with the phrase, "the secret working of the Spirit" (arcano testimonium Spiritu, III, i, chapter heading; OS IV, 1, 6-7). Overall there emerges a possibility for understanding (intelligere) that carries a good part of the discussion throughout the better part of Book III.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the terms "docility," "obedience," and "assent" and the kinds of sentences that go with them do not appear in this discussion of the Spirit and what it elicits. Just as docility as an effect of the Spirit seems arbitrary and mechanical pointing us to what can be learned, so the terms Calvin uses to

describe the activity of the Spirit in III, i point us to what can be understood. That is, they bespeak a transformation of the self that corresponds to a pervasively effective response in the subject to the object such that one can see both why one speaks about the object in the way set forth and why one's life takes on the character that is described. In considering this "principle work of the Holy Spirit" (fides praecipium est eius opus, III, i, 4; OS IV, 5, 14; proprium munus, III, i, 4; OS IV, 6, 3; opus eius peculiare, III, ii, 39; OS IV, 49, 36) we are in an entirely different arena of thought and language.

The terms for the Holy Spirit in III, i are the verbs "to enjoy," "to unite effectually," "to quicken," "to nourish," "to taste," "to assure," "to make us fruitful," "to cleanse," "to purify," "to restore," "to inflame," and "to breathe divine life into us" and the nouns "sanctifier," "spirit of adoption," "guarantee and seal," "water," "oil," "anointing," "fire," and "spring." Calvin takes these terms from scripture, but he uses them here not to teach what must be learned by assent but to show the appropriate description of that power by which the distance between God and us that still pertains in objective knowledge is overcome, and Christ becomes ours. By implication the verbal tense shifts from past to present and the verbal mood from imperative to indicative. Now the talk is not about what has been written but about what is the case in the life of faith, not about what one should or must know but about what one knows and is.

The 1960 translation of the Institutes by Ford Lewis Battles has rightly become the standard English version. It is fluent and remarkably free of errors. I find, however, one serious mistake in translation that is pertinent to the present point. Battles rendered the beginning of III, i as follows: "We must now examine this question. 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? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us (i.e., objective to 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." And then the critical sentence: "Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and dwell within us" (my emphasis). The Latin for the last clause is "nostrum fieri et in nobis habitare oportet" (OS IV, 1, 14). By rendering "oportet" in the past tense Battles causes us to think of an event that is over and done with, possibly even conjuring up the incarnation as the referent, an "event" objective to us by which Christ became identified with humanity in general. "It was necessary"; "Christ had to become. . . ." Oportet, however, is in the present tense (and, by the way, is rightly rendered by both Allen and Beveridge): "It is necessary," "Christ must become. . . ." Calvin is not speaking here of what happened in the past and thus outside of us. On the contrary, he is speaking of what must happen now, of what must happen and does happen at any time; if salvation, the new creation of the self as an integer, is to take place.

There is a mystery here, but it is quite different from the mystery, if that is the right word, in the production and preservation by

God of a book containing the true information about God's plan. This event is a mystery in the sense that one cannot attribute it to an ordinary cause without violating the nature of the event itself as one understands it. One is speaking of a response to the proclamation of Christ that turns one outward from oneself and constitutes thereby such a radical determination of one's life that it would be a violation of what one understands to have happened to attribute it to oneself or to any other cause within the world. The response can only be gratitude which requires for its syntactical completion a prepositional phrase beginning with "to." The voice of the verb changes from active to passive, which requires for its syntactical completion a prepositional phrase beginning with "by." The mystery is God. We are grateful to God; we have been illumined and made new by the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the object remains, but the coupling of object and subject with its accompanying language is coherent. Calvin himself does not explicitly exhibit this coherence, but it is present in his discussion and consistent in his language in those two first chapters of Book III.

There is a comparable coherence in the chapters that follow where Calvin tracks this new life in relation to Christ in the life of the believer. Here Calvin is explicit about the coherence of what he wants to say. He makes two points that tend to clarify it. First, at the beginning of Chapter III: "Even though we have taught in part how faith possesses Christ, and how through it we enjoy his benefits, this would still remain obscure if we did not add an explanation of the effects we feel" (III, III, 1; OS IV, 55, 2-5). The verb "to feel" (sentire) is not to be confused with goose bump sentimentality; it refers to what happens in the human being who is determined by faith. More important is the indicative mode (not "what we should feel") and the present tense. One is inclined to say there is no authority at all operating here. Calvin is simply describing what happens, and only the logic of the human self makes it persuasive. Second, he emphasizes that these effects are not derivative from faith; they are not inferences or subsequent steps. Rather they are immediately given with faith. He is describing the new creature, showing how the person determined by faith lives. "We do not imagine," he writes, "some space of time" between the occurrence of faith and its effects (III, III, 2; OS IV, 56, 21-23). Again, no authority is guiding him toward what he should say.

This logic is expressed materially in the first subject, repentance (III, III). "Surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance" (III, III, 1; OS IV, 55, 20-23). That is, anything else is unthinkable.

So one is repentant because the new life in which one is turned outward from the self carries with it the memory of a life turned in upon itself and the consciousness of the residual power of that self-centeredness. Because the new life is a being turned outward from the self, it is a life that is and wants to be lived for others and in denial of the self, bearing the cross, as it were. Although one does not hate the present life, one realizes that one both is and is not determined by faith, that the present life is not complete, and one is led

to meditate on the future life. All of this, the new determination of life and its effects, is summarized in the doctrine of justification by faith. The one who is thus justified and related in gratitude to God will speak the truth to God. That is, that person will pray. The elements fit.

Even the polemics in these chapters fit the overall coherence and resist impulses to inject incoherence. He objects to the Scholastic doctrine of penance because those who teach it "are wonderfully silent concerning the inward renewal of the mind, which bears with it the correction of life" (III, iv, 1; OS IV, 85:31-86:1). He objects to their insistence on satisfactions, the practices of indulgences, and the doctrine of purgatory, referring to them as "superstitions" ("superstitiones, III, v, 10; OS IV, 146, 5). By that term he means something comparable to what we mean: a claim that a certain result follows from a certain act when there is no coherent connection between the cause and the effect.

In the discussion of justification, he attacks Osiander and, once again, the Scholastics. The basis for these criticisms is the same in both instances. He objects to Osiander because he transformed the doctrine of justification into a metaphysical theory. "In this whole disputation," so Calvin writes about Osiander, "the noun 'righteousness' and the verb 'to justify' are extended in two directions; so that to be justified is not only to be reconciled to God through free pardon (i.e., relational) but also to be made righteous, and righteousness is not a free imputation but the holiness and uprightness that the essence of God, dwelling in us, inspires. Secondly, he sharply states that Christ himself is our righteousness, not in so far as he by expiating sins as Priest appeased the Father on our behalf, but as he is eternal God and life" (III, xi, 6; OS IV, 187, 9-16). Calvin's problem with this theory is that it objectifies the matter and thereby distorts justification for human beings. "We do not, therefore, contemplate (speculamur) outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body--in short, because he deigns to make us one with him" (III, xi, 10; OS IV, 191, 31-34).

Calvin's objection to the Scholastics on this issue focuses on their having construed the doctrine as a legal transaction. One begins by "accepting grace" (III, xiv, 12; OS IV, 231, 11-12, 16-17), and then one's works coupled with forgiveness supplemented by works of supererogation maintain the righteousness that has been granted. Again, this legal construal objectifies what Calvin thinks can only be understood in relational terms. Only when the self is determined in relation to the object, Christ, does one's life become characterized by gratitude and self-denial with the consequence that all grounds for boasting are undermined.

In this sentence we see the basic connections in the doctrine of faith. He resisted every attempt he knew that threatened to break the human logic of what he saw. In it is a coherence that is available not only to those who are determined by this faith but also universally.

That is, even those not determined by faith, once they understand what the subject is and how it is properly expressed, can see that the parts fit together and constitute a coherent whole.

III. Coherence and Incoherence in Calvin's Doctrine of Election

The coherence of Book III seems to break apart in Chapter xxi when Calvin introduces the doctrine of eternal election, the predestination of some to salvation and others to damnation. With only a nod or two to the doctrine of faith--and those only by application, not with immediacy--Calvin sets forth the doctrine objectively as an explanation of what is the case with God. Once again the discussion is pervasively determined by the scripture principle, and the proper human response is docility and assent.

With his remarkable knowledge of scripture Calvin ranges with agility over the canon in presenting the evidence for geminal predestination, but it is clear that Romans 9-11, Ephesians 1:4-5, and accounts in the Hebrew scriptures of the election of Israel are the driving force. The doctrine of election is given with the scripture principle.

Calvin does make a gesture toward putting together an argument in support of the justice of God in eternal election. His gesture, however, is no more successful here than it was in the discussions of the natural knowledge of God, the divinity of scripture, fallen humanity and human responsibility, or divine providence. He argues that God's justice demands that God condemn and that God's mercy leads God to save. His ship of thought, however, runs aground on the principle of equity. He cannot explain why neither justice nor mercy is universal in application, nor can he propose a principle of selection that makes sense. The consideration of equity, by the way, was well known to Calvin, and he gave it an essential place in his exposition of both ecclesiastical and civil government (cf. IV, xx, 16).

In passing (III, xxiii, 11) Calvin acknowledges that some "falsely and wickedly" (III, xxiii, 11; OS IV, 405, 1) have raised the question of equity, but he responds lamely by insisting that since election has no ground in the person there is no partiality on God's side (III, xxiii, 10) and by returning to the references to justice and mercy, quoting Augustine (III, xxiii, 11). Implicitly he acknowledges that his gesture toward argument is inconclusive. In treating election, he notes, we are dealing with a mystery that is beyond all understanding. The divine plan is "incomprehensible" (III, xxiii, 1; OS IV, 394, 10).

Scripture dictates proper conclusions. Justice is determined not by what we think the word means but by what God does, rationality not by what makes sense to us but by what God says, and wisdom not by any human criteria but by what God thinks. God's acting, speaking, and thinking are reliably found in one place only: Holy Scripture. As he put it succinctly, "We forget to speak well when we cease to speak with God" (III, xxiii, 5; OS IV, 399, 27-28). To challenge that principle is to evoke from Calvin a pass at an argument and then the question from Romans

9:20, "O homo? tu quis es qui disceptes cum Deo?" (Who are you, O man, to argue with God?" III, xxiii, 4; OS IV, 397, 30-31, et passim).

The other side of the observation that Calvin's reasoning is determined in advance by the conclusion given in scripture (better said, his denial of human reason) is the observation that scripture, in this doctrine as in others, plays a limiting role. Calvin insists that we can say only so much as scripture says and no more. With Lactantius, Calvin thought we should remember that the word "religion" derives etymologically from the verb "relegere," to keep within limits (I, xii, 1; OS III, 105, 18-21). Given this premise, Calvin is both consistent and moderate. Because what is given in scripture is not an intelligible concept he does not treat it as such. He refuses to use this datum of knowledge, as certain as it is, as a base from which to draw inferences. He knows that to do so is a natural human tendency, but precisely because of that fact he considers the tendency in this case one of Satan's most convenient tools. Human reason must stay clear of this doctrine; we are to accept what we are told and do nothing with it.

Indeed, do nothing with it. The doctrine of geminal predestination in Calvin is finally a purely formal doctrine. It is God's secret and incomprehensible plan. Not only can we not understand it as such, we cannot determine from it any application other than those few cases we are given in scripture (e.g., "Jacob I loved, and Esau I hated.").

It is the great fault of later Calvinists that they overlooked this formal character of double election as Calvin presented it and began to explore ways by which one could apply the doctrine determining with reference to specific persons who, in God's eternal and immutable plan, is saved and who is damned. Calvin allows for nothing of the sort. Does a person show every sign of reprobation? That person may yet be converted, and even should that person die without showing any signs of change, her or his inner life is unknowable to us. Does a person show every sign of having been elected to life? That person may be like the grain of wheat that fell on shallow soil, and even should that person die before withering like the rootless plant, no one of us can know his or her inner life. ("Far be it from us to say that judgment belongs to the clay, not to the potter!" [III, xxiii, 14; OS IV, 409, 17; cf. III, xxiii, 13 and xxiv, 1]). As presented in scripture, as a datum of knowledge to be accepted without understanding, the doctrine is purely formal.

As such Calvin recognizes that it is "horrible" (III, xxiii, 7; OS IV, 401, 28) and a "deep abyss" (III, xxiv, 3; OS IV, 413, 22-23). We can say it was horrible in more ways than Calvin thought. As assented to and defended by Calvin, the doctrine was destructive of human understanding. Given a claim that a statement or set of statements is certainly true, the human mind will inevitably raise questions and attempt to explore the implications. It is not historically reflective to criticize that fact in a naive age when human understanding was undermined on so many sides and in a provincial age when in looking at one's own authority one did not need blinders to block out the sight of comparable but conflicting authorities standing alongside. In our own day, how-

ever, one must say that such an assault on human reason is horrible indeed.

That horror subsides in five paragraphs near the end of Calvin's treatment of the divine election, and we are presented with quite a different picture of the doctrine. These paragraphs deserve our careful attention.

Calvin is aware that his representation of geminal predestination out of the scripture principle as what I have called a "formal" doctrine--that is, a doctrine with no determinable application at all--will almost invariably evoke severe unrest in the faithful. It is not enough, therefore, to rest with a purely objective exposition that glorifies God and evokes awe and humility in human beings. He must deal as well with the problem of certainty among the faithful.

He alludes immediately to the theme with which he began Book III, the illumination of the Spirit. "This inner call," he writes, "is a pledge of salvation that cannot deceive us" (III, xxiv, 2; OS IV, 412, 31-32: Interior igitur haec vocatio pignus est salutis quod fallere non potest). This is an astonishing shift from the impossibility of human judgment he has just elaborated in detail. Certainty about a salvific relation to God is to be found only in the occurrence of faith, the cause of which the believer can only attribute to the secret testimony of the Holy Spirit. The sentence I have just written is nothing more than a restatement in somewhat different order of Calvin's definition of faith. Faith is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." The question of certainty about oneself has already been answered.

No other answer should be sought. As a matter of fact, Calvin feels obliged to enter the most serious warning against any attempt to raise the question about oneself out of the exposition to which he has just devoted more than three chapters! "We should indeed seek assurance of it (our salvific relation to God) from this (the evocation of faith in us by the Holy Spirit): for if we try to penetrate to God's eternal ordination, that deep abyss will swallow us up" (III, xxiv, 3; OS IV, 413, 21-23: Certitudo quidem eius inde nobis petenda, quia si ad aeternam Dei ordinationem penetrare tentemus profunda illa abyssus nos in-gurgitabit). Some people, he says, "to make sure about God's plan . . . perversely yearn to flit above the clouds" (III, xxiv, 3; OS IV, 413.31-414.1). "This rashness," he continues, "must be restrained by the soberness of faith that in his outward Word, God may sufficiently witness his secret grace to us" (III, xxiv, 3; OS IV, 414, 1-3). Note the relational form of the sentence: nobis, to us.

The warning continues: "Satan has no more grievous or dangerous temptation to dishearten believers (strong language for Calvin) than when he unsettles them with doubt about their election, while at the same time he arouses them with a wicked desire to seek it outside the way. I call it 'seeking outside the way' when mere man attempts to

break into the inner recesses of divine wisdom, and tries to penetrate even to highest eternity, in order to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God's judgment seat. For then he casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in immeasurable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness" (III, xxiv, 4; OS IV, 414, 10-19). The temptation is "all the deadlier, since almost all of us are more inclined to it than any other" (III, xxiv, 4; OS IV, 414, 22-23). Indeed! Given a piece of knowledge as certain one will assume it is applicable and explore it. Calvin feels impelled, in effect, to urge his readers not even to think about the fact of double predestination . . . lest they imperil their salvation!

Certainty is found only in being related to Christ through whom the good things of God are extended toward us. Because these good things are received in faith as a gift we may appropriately "feel" (sentiat) that the benefits result from our "secret adoption" (ex recondita illa adoptione) (III, xxiv, 4; OS IV, 415, 4-6). That is "as much as we may lawfully know of his plan" (III, xxiv, 4; OS IV, 415, 8-10). Finally, "for it is his will that we be content with his promises, and not inquire elsewhere whether he will be disposed to hear us" (III, xxiv, 5; OS IV, 416, 33-34). The shift in Calvin's mode of thought and speech in these five paragraphs is all the more astonishing when we recall that the certainty of faith, to which he now refers, is not unattended by doubt and unbelief!

A further astonishment over the shift in these paragraphs comes with the recognition that in them Calvin does not allude to double predestination at all. The certainty of faith carries with it no knowledge of another person and no inference about damnation. One can only with confidence based on trust in God count oneself an object of God's benevolence and, receiving that benevolence as a life-determining gift, hazard to think, avoiding, however, any ground for boasting, that one has been freely elected, a mystery that not only must but can be left to God.

There is in these paragraphs a coherence, so to speak a "human" logic, that renders what Calvin writes here comprehensible. It is the same coherence that I tried to describe in connection with relational knowledge in I, i and ii, and the first twenty chapters of Book III. Making this observation specifically with respect to election, distinguishing these few pages from the many he devotes to the subject, illuminates a special difficulty Calvin faced and could not easily solve with his scripture principle. I refer to the difficulty of bringing a stop to all speech and thought once the divine election has been uttered. As long as the doctrine is represented as objective truth the mind cannot bring itself to a halt, and it will do so only by cajoling and thus by denial of that impulse to understand, intelligere, that is a part of being human. On the other hand, when the starting point is the grateful consciousness of being put in relation to God, the utterance of the term "election" (single election spoken in a whisper) stands at the end rather than at the beginning of the series, and the mind as well as the mouth comes to rest.

Conclusion

I have two brief and somewhat speculative points to make in conclusion.

The first has to do with Calvin's well-known aversion to superstition. So far as I know, no one has yet made a careful and thorough study of Calvin's use of this word to see if he uses it consistently, to see therefore if what he objects to as superstition is a generically unified set of beliefs or practices. Should anyone undertake such a study, the question that should be explored is, "Does Calvin consistently understand by superstition the acceptance of something as true or the adoption of certain practices on grounds that are incoherent with what is accepted or adopted?" This is the ordinary meaning of superstition, as in the belief that to break a mirror is to cause seven years of bad luck. It is clear that this genre of beliefs and practices is what Calvin had in mind some of the time when he spiced his polemics with the epithet "superstition." If, however, that ordinary meaning is the key to Calvin's usage, we must observe that he violated his proscription of superstition at one most critical point with immense consequences for his theology. I refer to his support of the objective knowledge of God in scripture. The structure he erects in explanation of the certainty of this knowledge and its identity with the canon is incoherent. Historically it is difficult to fault Calvin on this point. His explanation of scriptural authority and of how human beings become certain of it may be unique, but he certainly cannot be distinguished from most of his contemporaries and forebears in affirming the certain truth of scripture in all its parts. Moreover, as we have observed, scripture to Calvin was a limiting principle. We know only what it tells us and no more. In this insistence he was more moderate and modest than a good many of his contemporaries and forebears. Even so, from the perspective of our own time, his (and the other's) claims for the divine origin of the canon and for the divine confirmation of its divine origin must strike one as arbitrary, provincial, and incoherent--in short, as superstitious.

The second point has to do with the consequences for the doctrine of election in Calvin if the scripture principle is removed. One can only say that given Calvin's warnings against saying any more about the secret recesses of God's mind, so to speak the abscondite side of God, than we must by virtue of having been informed by God, all talk about double predestination would disappear. It would not be replaced by an alternate explanation of human destiny but rather by a pervasive agnosticism. If "we cease to speak well when we cease to speak with God" then in the absence of a declaration from God we can only keep silent.

Finally, one must, of course, raise the question whether the loss of the scripture principle, as Calvin took it, would not mean the collapse of everything he said. To that question an affirmative answer could be given only if one held that the beginning of faith is with an arbitrary and incomprehensible assent. In my judgment, no one who understands what Calvin meant by the faith that makes people new can hold to that view.

Notes

¹Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps (Lausanne: Georges Bridel et Cie Editeurs, 1910), Tome IV, p. 60.

²English quotations from the Institutes are for the most part from the Battles translation. References in parentheses are first to book, chapter, and paragraph (e.g., I, I, 1) and second to the critical Latin text, Calvini opera selecta (OS) noting volume, page, and line or lines (e.g., IV, 27, 8-12).

³Excursus: The controversy about whether or not Calvin thinks we can have a knowledge of God from nature is illuminative for our topic at one point. It is clear from I, III and v that Calvin approved both ontology and cosmology as modes for knowing God. That the human mind is endowed by "natural instinct" (naturali instinctu) with "an awareness of divinity (divinitatis sensum) is "beyond controversy" (extra controversiam, I, III, 1; OS III, 37, 16-17). Moreover, the universe is so skillfully ordered that human beings are "compelled" (cogantur, I, v, 2; OS III, 45, 4; cf. OS III, 46, 11) to see God reflected in it as in a mirror (I, v, 1). Actually it is astonishing how much Calvin thought one could know about God by these natural means. It appears to be greater in scope than what we find in Anselm and Thomas combined. But, however much we are able to know about God from nature, this human capacity serves finally only to justify the condemnation of humankind. Because we are corrupted we will always distort the truth with the result that this knowledge can never be "certain or solid or clear-cut" (I, v, 12; certum, vel solidum, vel distinctum, OS III, 57, 24). It is this insistence, of course, that leads him to assert the need for God's own voice in scripture if we are to know anything about God with certitude.

What is most striking about these chapters on the knowledge of God from nature is the argumentation or lack of it. It should come as no surprise even to the most devoted disciple of Calvin that the positive material in I, III and v is not included in books that collect the important texts in natural theology. Calvin either substitutes assertions for arguments, or his arguments are poorly developed and weak. The reason is not difficult to find, and it is instructive. Already in these early chapters he is assuming the scripture principle, and what he writes in I, III and v is above all an exposition of Romans 1. That is, the quality of argument is less important to Calvin than its concurrence with scripture. The line of thought is determined by its conclusion, which is known in advance. The cogency of thought is assessed not by any canons for cogency but by its end point. This procedure is far removed from Anselm's credo ut intelligam. Intelligere, if we mean by that term "to understand, to make sense of in some way similar to the way humans make sense of other things," plays no role in this exposition, as we shall see that it plays no role in Calvin's scripture principle or in the doctrine of geminal predestination based on that principle.

⁴Cf. I, II, 1, where Adam's original state is described as being integral (si integer stetisset Adam, translated by Battles as "upright," OS III, 34, 17). Note the relation of the Latin integer (unit, whole) to the Greek root so (unit, whole) as in sodzein (to save, to make whole), soter (savior, the one who makes whole), soteria (salvation, wholeness). The salvation that, according to Calvin, becomes effectual in this collapse of the distance between subject and object is therefore not primarily an expectation of eternal life in heaven but a present reality, and meditation on the future life is only an accompaniment that calls for brief treatment after he has discussed most of the effects of faith here and now.