

CALVIN'S SO-CALLED EPISTEMOLOGY

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The attempt to understand Calvin's theology requires a *starting* point behind which inevitably is a *stand* point. In other words, an obvious relation exists between judgment and judge, the scholarly exposition of another and the scholarly convictions of the self. Since no one can step completely out of his body or go entirely out of her head this situation cannot be finally resolved, but it can be acknowledged and addressed. Syngenesis is nicely demonstrated in the discussion of "Calvin's epistemology" or more accurately as I think, "Calvin's so-called epistemology." The issue is often focused around exegesis of the famous opening sentence of the *Institutes*: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." The chief question concerns the extent to which this declaration is faith-based, scripture-based, reason-based, experience-based, etc. The most detailed epistemological reflection involves Calvin's use of reason, sometimes anchored in a concept of common grace,¹ but for Calvin interpretation it is important to recognize how differently this sentence is understood in (1) orthodox Calvinism, (2) neo-orthodox Calvinism, (3) liberal Calvinism, and (4) what might be called no-school Calvinism.

Some of Calvin's major interpreters avoid a full-scale investigation of Calvin's so-called epistemology in favor of expounding emphases in Calvin that are often enhanced and defended for modern purposes in modern terms and historically identified with Calvin and the Reformed tradition. As exemplified by François Wendel Calvin scholarship has dealt with "the knowledge of God and of revelation" especially from the believer's perspective but does not inquire into human understanding in itself. The other schools emphasize congenial noetic components like Scripture, Reason, Conscience, and Faith. Among the special candidates for emphatic attention are the older categories of (1) tradition and (2) Scripture, and the newer ones of (3) experience and (4) reason. Unlike the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, these concepts in Calvin are neither unified nor sequential nor exhaustive, with the result that fierce debates will surely continue concerning Calvin's intentions and results.

¹ According to Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Smitten Book Company, 1928), p. 208, "[Calvin] holds that all men are endowed with reason and understanding, have some knowledge of the Godhead and some perception between what is just and unjust[.]"

1. TRADITION

For Protestants, tradition apart from Scripture is not identified as a separate source of true knowledge. His interpreters therefore often follow Calvin in justifying ecclesiastical developments occurring in history and outside Scripture, like the doctrine of Trinity, as validated by serving the truth of Scripture. If challenged to accept some crucial doctrines, like the one-person-two-natures formula, as the church's reverent attempt to understand Scripture but actually non-or extra-Biblical, presumably Calvin would be required to justify theological tradition more carefully and on other than Scriptural grounds. The epistemological role of tradition seems to be an implied subtext of Benjamin Warfield's organization of the *Institutes* along the lines of the Apostles' Creed and Philip Butin's exposition according to the doctrine of the Trinity. In any case, tradition in Calvin is a real but underdeveloped epistemological category in that he does not explain the criterion by which we can distinguish non-Biblical theological formulations that serve the truth of Scripture from those that do not.

2. SCRIPTURE

The accuracy of the Dowey gloss on *Institutes* 1.1.1 in the McNeill edition to the effect that the word "knowledge" rather than "being" or "existence of God" "emphasizes the centrality of revelation in both the structure and content of Calvin's theology" is generally accepted, and employing the term "Calvin's epistemology" points to the role of Scripture in it. Clearly Calvin teaches the knowledge of God and ourselves but whether, and in what sense, Calvin has an epistemology remains undetermined.

The appeal to Scripture for knowledge of God and man in Calvin is so massive that every student of his work must deal with the topic, as neo-orthodox interpreters insist. Behind Wilhelm Niesel's interpretation (*The Theology of Calvin*, Chapter Two) we can glimpse the theology of Karl Barth and behind Edward Dowey's, Emil Brunner, but the personal sources underlying other expositions are harder to identify. Among the obvious, dividing issues are Calvin's relation to the question of Scriptural infallibility and inerrancy and exact meaning of "the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit," which seems epistemologically to wrap a special riddle in a particular enigma. However, the literature on Calvin and Scripture need not be rehearsed in a reflection on his so-called epistemology because while Calvin presumes the validity of his inferences from Scripture, he does not more specifically indicate the logical grounds of their legitimacy. In other words, Scripture has a dominant, almost exclusive, role in the knowledge of God and man, but Calvin *assumes* rather than *explains* the epistemological transition from text to application.

3. EXPERIENCE

Some recent attention has been directed to the epistemological role of experience in Calvin's theology. The essays by H. Obendick and W. Balke and Charles Partee² focus on Calvin's text rather than attempting to set him in a wider context. The latter, as it seems to me, is the purpose of the small Schleiermacher sodality in Calvin studies. As the proponents of Reformed Orthodoxy insist their doctrine *conserves* Calvin's true theology so do the cultured friends of Schleiermacher insist their doctrine *liberates* Calvin's true theology. In other words, each group claims to be the legitimate heir of Calvin's legacy.

B. A. Gerrish advocates an experiential model of theology, "which I see as rooted in the Reformation, recovered by Schleiermacher, partially misrepresented by Ernst Troeltsch, and rejected for insufficient reasons by Barth and Brunner."³ In a direct comparison of Calvin and Schleiermacher Gerrish focuses on the common opposition of Calvin and Schleiermacher to intellectual speculation and their common affirmation of the role of piety in theology. Of special interest is Gerrish's comparison of their doctrines of Trinity as like and unlike. Schleiermacher thought the doctrine was muddled and obsolete while Calvin thought the traditional terms were valuable because they defended piety. According to Gerrish, "The doctrine of the Trinity, in Calvin's view, did not transgress the limits of piety."⁴ If the purpose of the doctrine of Trinity were simply the service of piety, then Calvin and Schleiermacher might be close, but Schleiermacher finds the doctrine of Trinity a theological embarrassment while Calvin thinks the doctrine of Trinity serves piety because it is the truth of God.

Happily for the cause of connubial felicity, Dawn DeVries agrees with Brian Gerrish, her husband, on the relation between Calvin and Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher called himself a Moravian of a higher order and DeVries declares Gerrish to be a Calvinist of a higher order. Among the tasks taken up by higher order Calvinists is the correction of the neoorthodox misunderstanding of Schleiermacher and then the demonstration that Schleiermacher's theology is a faithful development from Calvin's.

For the present purpose, the most important of DeVries' claims is this: Schleiermacher is more able than Calvin to formulate coherently the relationship between Christology and soteriology. Calvin's entire soteriology is based on the notion of a union with Christ that is effected by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word and faith. Although he is clear in

² H. Obendick, "Die Erfahrung in ihrem Verhältnis zum Worte Gottes bei Calvin," *Aus Theologie und Geschichte der Reformierten Kirche: Festgabe für E. F. Karl Müller* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen, 1933), pp. 180-211; W. Balke, "The Word of God and Experientia according to Calvin," *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*, ed. by W. H. Neuser (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1978); Charles Partee, "Calvin and Experience," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26/2 (May 1973), pp. 169-181.

³ B. A. Gerrish, "Theology and Historical Consciousness," in *Revisioning the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology*, ed. by Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 302.

⁴ B. A. Gerrish, "Theology within the Limits of Piety Alone: Schleiermacher and Calvin's Doctrine of God" in *Reformatio Perennis: Essays on Calvin and the Reformation in Honor of Ford Lewis Battles*, ed. by B. A. Gerrish (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), p. 79.

insisting that this union is necessary for salvation, Calvin is, however, unclear about how it relates to the objective, and presumably self-sufficient, "work" of Christ that he set out in Book 2 of his *Institutes*. Schleiermacher, on the contrary, defines the work of the Redeemer from beginning to end in terms of a necessary union of Christ and the believer. And while, like Calvin, he argues that this union with Christ requires a conjunction of Word, faith, and Spirit, Schleiermacher is better able than Calvin to explain this conjunction as a hermeneutic event that entails a human act of interpretation. The preacher's words "embody" the Word; that is, preaching becomes the continuing locus for the ongoing redemptive work of Christ.⁵

It is not clear to me how Schleiermacher's "hermeneutic event" is better able to explicate union with Christ and thus "more able than Calvin to formulate coherently the relationship between Christology and soteriology," but it is clear some scholars believe Schleiermacher's reformed theology is an improvement on Calvin's.

Certainly a plausible case can be made for *some* genuine commonalities between Calvin and Schleiermacher. Full credit can be extended to both theologians for their desire to interpret the traditional Biblical faith with integrity. Moreover, each may be accurately called a "theologian of Christian experience," but even such points when carefully argued in particular, are not finally convincing because the concept of experience is so differently defined. The sharpest difference is that Calvin thought theology was the explication of the truth of faith while Schleiermacher thought theology was the explication of the believers' consciousness. For Calvin the referent for Truth is God; for Schleiermacher it is Self. Moreover, Schleiermacher, for all his expertise in Plato, adopts the noumenal/phenomenal distinction of Kantian metaphysics, precluding for Schleiermacher a direct and objective relation with God in favor of the feeling of absolute dependence mediated through subjective consciousness. Since Calvin had not studied Kant, his theology is innocent of the Kantian epistemological reserve.

4. REASON

The most carefully argued epistemological position involves Calvin's use of reason and is presented by philosophers and theologians from the school of reformed orthodoxy. In their view Calvin is understood as a proto-theo-logician and the term "Calvinistic philosophy" refers to this position in general with "reformed epistemology" forming a particular subdivision. Its lineage includes Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, and among contemporary theologians, Richard Muller, and among contemporary philosophers, Dewey Hoitenga.

The Orthodox Calvinist Philosophers

In his introduction to reformed epistemology entitled *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, Hoitenga devotes chapter 6 to Calvin.⁶ According to Hoitenga "[T]he word *Reformed* identifies the theological tradition inspired by John Calvin and the epistemological claim derives from Calvin's famous words near the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*" expounding the awareness of divinity (I.3.1). Hoitenga thinks the central claim of

⁵ Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 9.

⁶ Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991).

Reformed epistemology is the immediacy of human knowledge of God based on the awareness of divinity (Preface). In this he associates his conclusions with Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.⁷

The point to notice is that Hoitenga does not actually claim to be interpreting Calvin directly. He claims simply to be working from a “tradition inspired by Calvin.” Moreover, his pages purport only to demonstrate that his epistemological position *can be derived* from Calvin. “Inspired by” and “derived from” are claims so soft and weak they can be courteously granted to the recognizance of the scholar making them.

The Orthodox Calvinist Theologians

More directly on topic is the confidence in reason expressed by the Westminster Confession, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Richard Muller, and, as I see it, the strangest of their bedfellows, Thomas Torrance.

According to the Westminster Confession, “The whole counsel of God, is *either* expressly set down in Scripture, *or* by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”⁸ The learned divines at Westminster make an interesting and sophisticated logical move consciously accepted from Thomas Aquinas, who learned it from Aristotle.⁹ The claim is that necessary consequences are not located in the mind of the deducer but in the text itself! Thus, theological affirmations can be drawn from Scripture exactly without adding to or diminishing from its meaning. A conclusion necessarily (as opposed to possibly) deduced from Scripture is itself divine truth.

Of course, both true premises and good and necessary consequences may be denied by ignorant and sinful thinkers. Therefore the ontological relation between source and deduction requires expansion into an epistemological context containing individuals and communities who possess rectified, regenerate, or sanctified reason as the Westminster divines recognized. Interestingly, the Westminster Confession precisely defined the first two parts of this sequence (Scripture and deduction) but left the latter two (sanctified reason in individual and community) without careful analysis.

Charles Hodge, who believed receiving the Bible as a supernatural revelation from God *was reasonable*, criticized Schleiermacher for not accepting the Bible “as containing doctrines

⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 26, 27, suggests that “Aquinas offers one classic version of foundationalism. There is, he said, a body of propositions which can be known by the natural light of reason — that is, propositions which can become self-evident to us in our present earthly state.” According to Wolterstorff, Calvin can be identified with “[a] second classic view of the relation of faith and reason [that] can be called the *pre-conditionalist* view. Faith is seen as a condition for arriving at a fully comprehensive, coherent, consistent, and true body of theories in the sciences.”

⁸Article I, 6 emphasis added.

⁹ Minutes of the Sessions of the Assembly of Divines, Session 640, 15 May 1646; Thomas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 1015a20-b15; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a20-b15.

which we are bound to believe on the authority of the sacred writers.¹⁰ Hodge charges Schleiermacher with being rationalistic while he himself is only properly rational. Hodge admits "The ultimate ground of faith and knowledge is confidence in God," but he immediately adds that we must "confide in those laws of belief which God has implanted in our nature." Since it is impossible that God contradict himself, it is likewise impossible that God could reveal something as true which "by the laws of our nature He has rendered it impossible we should believe."¹¹

Hodge begins with the assurance that theology is a science, and the theologian's task is to collect adequate evidence needed for persuasion of the truth. All the facts of theology are contained in the Scriptures and the principles properly deduced from these facts such as the axioms: "All truth must be consistent. God cannot contradict himself."¹² Rejecting both rationalism and mysticism, Hodge holds there is a proper office for reason in theology — a "prerogative of Reason." Christians are obliged to acknowledge the high prerogatives of reason and a serious responsibility in its proper exercise. "In the first place, reason is necessarily presupposed in every revelation. Revelation is the communication of truth to the mind." Faith is the affirmation of the proposition believed. "[F]aith involves assent, and assent is conviction produced by evidence[.]" "The first and indispensable office of reason, therefore, in matters of faith, is the cognition or intelligent apprehension of the truths proposed for our reception." "In the second place, it is the prerogative of reason to judge the credibility of a revelation." Hodge defines the credible as that which can be believed rationally, that is, on adequate grounds. "A thing may be strange, unaccountable, unintelligible, and yet perfectly credible." What is incomprehensible may not be unreasonable, but what is impossible cannot be true. "[Nevertheless] reason in pronouncing a thing impossible must act rationally and not capriciously."¹³

Continuing the focus on reason, Louis Berkhof argues for important analogies between divine being and human being.¹⁴ For example, "The laws of perception and thought are not arbitrary, but correspond to the nature of things [because] without such correspondence, not only the knowledge of God, but all true knowledge would be utterly impossible."¹⁵ The knowledge of God, then, is derived (1) from the revelation in nature, in human consciousness, and in the providential government of the world and (2) from the Scriptural revelation.¹⁶ Because of their doctrine of sin, Protestants "did not believe in the ability of human reason to construct a scientific system of theology on the basis of natural revelation pure and simple." Therefore, since the natural reason is severely damaged by human sin,

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1877), II, 441.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I.52.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49-53.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

God *republished* the truths of natural revelation in the supernatural revelation. Accordingly, in regeneration and sanctification God provides a cure for spiritual blindness that involves spiritual illumination.¹⁷ While human reason unaided cannot discover God, God can be known “by the application of *sanctified human reason* to the study of God’s Word.”¹⁸ Concerning God, Berkhof sees a crucial distinction between natural human reason, which cannot be trusted (because of sin) and sanctified human reason, which can be trusted (because of redemption).

Unfortunately, Berkhof, having announced, does not analyze further the roles of natural human reason and sanctified human reason. It would be interesting to know if sanctified reason applies only to the study of God’s Word or affects thoughts about other subjects like physics, mathematics, history, etc. Moreover, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to establish the criteria, whether rational or spiritual, by which individuals and groups are judged to possess sanctified reason and whether their possession is permanent or only occasional. In any case, Calvin does not develop a concept of sanctified reason. Putatively intended to advance Reformed theology, none of Westminster, Hodge, or Berkhof claim to be exegeting Calvin. Until fairly recently, the scholarly consensus held this “orthodox Calvinism” to be epigonic. Among the defenders of Calvin over against the Calvinists were A. C. McGiffert, H. R. MacIntosh, Basil Hall, Holmes Rolston III, Brian Armstrong, and R. T. Kendall.

On the opposite side in the service of the cause for continuity between Calvin and the Calvinists, Richard A. Muller has produced an impressive volume of work. Rejecting Barthian, Brunnerian, Whiteheadian, or Schleiermacherian readings of Calvin, Muller claims with amazing confidence to read Calvin unaccommodated. On the specific topic of reason Muller writes, “Reason itself, after the fall, only vaguely and indistinctly perceives the truth of God . . . and it never, of its own, either ‘approaches’ or ‘strives toward’ God.” Muller continues, “We find here, in other words, not a philosophical but a soteriological voluntarism that not only recognizes the necessity of grace to all good acts of the will but also recognizes that, in the soul’s present sinful condition, the will most certainly stands prior to the intellect.”¹⁹

Based on this judgment of Calvin, Muller concludes that Calvin is the founder of a theological tradition, but his theology cannot stand alone. Calvinism requires completion in “an entire body of true doctrine.” According to Muller, “This [latter] task was necessary to ensure the survival of Protestantism. Muller believes that “Calvin’s *Institutes* was no more than a basic instruction in the doctrines of Scripture and not a full system of theology written with the precision and detail of the systems of Calvin’s own Roman Catholic opponents.” He concludes, “The Protestant theologians of the second half of the sixteenth century — writers like Ursinus, Zanchius, and Polanus — took up the task of writing a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 166.

complete and detailed system of theology both for the sake of positive teaching and for the sake of polemical defense.”²⁰

According to Muller, “[S]cholasticism [which] is rightly defined as a dialectical method of the schools, historically rooted in the late patristic period, particularly in the thought of Augustine, developed throughout the Middle Ages in the light of classical logic and rhetoric, constructed with a view to the authority of text and tradition, and devoted primarily to the exposition of Scripture and the theological topics that derive from it using the best available tools of exegesis, logic, and philosophy.”²¹ Finding Protestant orthodoxy pleasing to his palate, Muller objects to the “distaste of scholasticism” on the part of other diners. Seasoning his complaint with a touch of spice, Muller claims the opposition has been over salted with “the theological categories of mid-twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy.”²² Accordingly he admires the Protestant scholastic *system* that is based on *principles* providing *arguments* derived either from *reason* or revelation.

Attending the same school, R. S. Clark defines scholasticism as a “technical and logical approach to theological system” subdividing loci into component parts and analyzing them by propositions. Addressing the role of reason in theology after Calvin, Clark objects to the conclusion that fallen human reason is given the same authority as revelation. Likewise reason is not given “an improper instrumental function.”

Declaring that the goal of Reformed Scholasticism was to provide “an adequate technical theology for schools,” Clark suggests, “[F]rom this perspective, the discursive method of Calvin’s *Institutes* . . . though still propositional, was something of an historical parenthesis in a larger period which was dominated by the scholastic method from the late twelfth century through the late eighteenth century.”²³ Applied to Calvin’s theology the term “propositional” is simply incorrect and the term “discursive” is confusing. If by discursive Clark means a casual passing from one subject to another in a rambling and digressive manner, the term does not describe Calvin’s careful prose. If discursive points to something like Aristotle’s distinction between the enthymeme and the syllogism, then Calvin is certainly

²⁰ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: the Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003).

²¹ Muller, “Scholasticism in Calvin: A Question of Relation and Disjunction” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* ed. by Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong. (Kirksville, Mo: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), p. 251.

²² Richard A. Muller, “The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism — A Review and Definition” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, ed. by Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 45-6, 56, 57-8.

²³ R. S. Clark, “The Authority of Reason in the Later Reformation Scholasticism in Calpar Olevian and Antoine de La Faye” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. by Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark. (Carlisle, Cambria: Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 111-126, 113, 114, 115-6, 116.

more rhetorical than dialectical.²⁴ Reformed scholasticism is often charged with understanding Calvin as a dialectician rather than a rhetorician.²⁵ This softer, i.e., less rigorously logical, definition of discursive does not comport with Clark's emphasis on propositions. Therefore Clark probably intends the stronger definition of discursive reasoning as the process of passing from certain propositions to other truths inferred to follow from them. On this view, inference follows necessarily in deductive reason but only contingently in inductive reason. Given the general direction of Clark's argument concerning Calvin's theology as technical, logical, discursive, and propositional, his admission that the *Institutes* "was something of an historical parenthesis," makes the opposite point. Rather than being "something of an historical parenthesis" the *Institutes* is "exactly an historical exception" to the development of scholastic theology both Protestant and Catholic.

In summary, Charles Hodge, Lewis Berkhof, Richard Muller and their like-minded friends find adumbrated in Calvin an epistemological need for logic and reason, syllogisms, principles and proofs, propositions and adequate evidence. The continuity school recognizes significant differences between Calvin and Calvinism, but their claim is nevertheless that Reformed Orthodoxy is a legitimate development of Calvin's theology rather than a serious distortion of it.

In addition to a questionable trust in "system" and the valorizing of a certain kind of "precision" and "detail," the main issue in contention is whether John Calvin offers "a full system of theology." In my language of preference the question is "Does John Calvin offer a faithful systematic reflection on, and confession of, the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ the Lord?" and my answer is an unqualified "Yes." I assume Muller's answer is "No" because he thinks writers like Ursinus, Zanchi, and Polanus were needed to take up "the task of writing a complete and detailed system of theology." In baseball terms, Muller regards Calvin as a starter, maybe even a middle reliever, but not a closer.

I include some paragraphs on T. F. Torrance here because Torrance claims to present a view of reason that agrees with Calvin. On the contrary, I think Torrance's view of objectivity and his confidence in objective reason is his own and not Calvin's.²⁶ Eschewing both liberal and conservative theologies and holding an admirably high Christology, Torrance identifies the mutual relation in Calvin between the knowledge of God and the knowledge

²⁴ Robert H. Ayers, "Language, Logic and Reason in Calvin's *Institutes*," *Religious Studies* 16, p. 290, recognizes that while "Calvin employs enthymemes, it is always possible from the context to supply the missing premise(s)." The point, however, is not whether a syllogism can be created, but whether Calvin intended one.

²⁵ On rhetoric and dialectic see my *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), pp. 4-8.

²⁶ According to Gary Dorrien, Torrance "contends that Barth's theology is chiefly distinguished by its presentation of the ontology and objectivity of the divine Word and by Barth's accompanying emphasis on the scientific nature of dogmatics." However, Torrance allows that Barth did not fully comprehend his own achievement, therefore Torrance's correction amounts "to a deepening and extension of Barth's conception of theology as a form of scientific rationality governed by its proper object." Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 160, 161.

of ourselves as the beginning of modern theology.²⁷ Since Torrance believes the nature of things is inherently rational, he seeks to establish a scientific theology resting on its own rational ground. According to Torrance, Calvin represents a radical revolt from medieval thought, which was abstract and rationalistic in a negative sense. Calvin taught, "The Truth is God Himself in His own Being, God Incarnate in Jesus Christ, not our statements about God, and not even Biblical statements about Him."²⁸

Based on the *analogia fide* referred to in the preface to the 1536 *Institutes* Torrance asserts, "Calvin insisted that appeal must be made beyond all ecclesiastical authority or biblical citation to *the truth of God*, for that is the supreme Authority to which all must submit and on which everyone must rely." "Theological statements do not carry their truth in themselves, but are true only insofar as they direct us away from themselves to the one Truth in God." The task of theology then is to point "to Christ, who alone is the Truth."²⁹ By this means Torrance connects Jesus Christ, the subject of Christian Truth, with Truth about the world. Theology does not merely *point* to Truth, it coheres with Truth on the basis of the hypostatic union. "The incarnation involves a hypostatic union not only between the Word of God and the word of man, the Rationality of God and the rationality of man, but between the uncreated Truth of God and the created truth of this world"³⁰

I understand Torrance's "critical realism" to derive from his convictions about the hypostatic union which allows reason to encounter the Truth of God. Torrance writes, "To *be* in the Spirit is to *be* in God, for the Spirit is not external but internal to the Godhead. But since it is only the Spirit of God who knows what is in God and it is he who unites us to the Son of God in his oneness with the Father, *through the Communion of the Spirit we are exalted to know God in his inner trinitarian relations* as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Emphasis original in first sentence, added in second sentence).³¹

²⁷ Torrance charges modern liberal theology with falling back on "the autonomous religious reason" making an ontological breach between Jesus Christ and God complemented by an ontological breach between the human mind and reality. On the other side, evangelical fundamentalism "substitutes a static for a dynamic view of revelation" rejecting "the fact that revelation must be continually given and received in a living relation with God" and is not "a self-contained corpus of divine truths in propositional form endowed with an infallibility of statement." "The practical and epistemological effect of a fundamentalism of this kind is to give an infallible Bible and a set of rigid evangelical beliefs primacy over God's self-revelation which is mediated to us through the Bible." T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 15, 26, 17.

²⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122 (original emphasis), 123.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p.150.

I take the following sentence as the key and pivot. "Thus when our contingent statements refer away from themselves to the Truth of God as it is in Jesus Christ, they do not have to bridge the infinite difference between the creature and the Creator in order to terminate upon that Truth, for they *may refer* to it in its incarnate Reality, and *insofar as they are true they may actually terminate* upon that incarnate Reality and thus upon the Truth of God Almighty himself." (Emphasis added). Torrance underlines the Christological focus this way: "Hence all our statements about the Truth will have their validity or truthfulness only through their derivation from and congruence with [Jesus Christ] as their Source and Justification."³² Torrance claims, "We know God truly only as we are cast upon His transcendent reality and as we think out of a center in that reality and not out of a center in ourselves."³³

Torrance declares the center out of which we must think is Jesus Christ and not ourselves. Nevertheless, so long as the old Adam lives no one will have the mind of the new Adam completely. The recommendation to have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5) while imperative is not indicative. It seems to me unrealistic and therefore presumptuous to assume we can bypass ourselves entirely in order to think out of transcendent reality. Granted our putative sainthood, we are still unable to think entirely outside of a center in ourselves because we remain obvious sinners and this estrangement from Truth surely extends to our thinking.

A CONCLUSION

Epistemologically in our thinking we can scarcely set aside the western philosophical tradition. Specifically, unlike Calvin, we are mightily influenced by Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant. On the other hand, reflection on human understanding by itself—that is purely epistemological analysis is so far from Calvin's mind that he asserts but does not analyze the categories he uses in discussing the knowledge of God and ourselves.

Calvin's use of concepts like tradition, scripture, experience, and reason is interlocking and demonstrates that neither reason nor experience nor for that matter Scripture or tradition is absolute sovereign in his theological reflection. They are bound together with Scripture the primary focus and the other witnesses in shifting ascendancy defying formulas. While most schools of Calvin interpretation are content to highlight emphases, orthodox Calvinists seek to offer a more complete epistemological program. The question remains whether a theology that is "technical," "logical," "systematic," and "propositional" is a development of Calvin or a distortion.

Calvin is properly regarded as a systematic thinker but not a system builder. His theology is based on Christian convictions not philosophical (or theological) principles. Moreover, while his use of reason is constant, his confidence in reason, natural or sanctified, is not unwavering. Calvin's theology is written for the faithful not the logical. It is not designed to exercise the mental muscles of academically trained professionals but to edify the Christian heart in the community of the faithful. Careful thinking is important for Calvin, but neither

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 126.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

logic nor system play dominant roles. In short, John Calvin is a theologian of the Christian heart and his faith is more confessional and doxological than logical and propositional.