CALVIN

for Armchair Theologians

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Illustrations by Ron Hill

CHAPTER THREE

Orienting Theology

How Calvin's Theology Is Organized

When Calvin first set out to write a summary of what Christians believe, he took for a model the order of topics Martin Luther used for his *Small Catechism*: the Law (or Ten Commandments), the Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments, and Christian Duties. Never entirely satisfied with this arrangement, Calvin made changes with each new version

of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* until he finally hit upon a way of organizing his theology that (he thought) made perfect sense. It went like this:

1. The Knowledge of God the Creator
2. The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel
3. The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow
4. The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein

These were the titles Calvin gave to the four "books" of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes.*

What is significant about this arrangement? Not all of Calvin's interpreters agree on an answer to that question. Did Calvin want to follow the order of the Apostles' Creed, which treats God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church (in that order)? Or did he divide up his text according to an idea of two kinds of knowledge of God—the knowledge of God as Creator and the knowledge of God as Redeemer? Whichever answer we choose (or even if we come up with another answer), it seems clear that Calvin did want to highlight the word *knowledge.* For Calvin, knowledge was not equivalent to reason. When he used the word, he had in mind the heart as much as the head. But he certainly wanted to explore how it is that human beings are aware of God, how they are related to God, and how God works to change the character of that relationship and to guide them through life to their ultimate destiny. His theology is an attempt to tell that story.

In looking at the story as Calvin presents it, we will follow the order of topics he devised. First, however, we need to look at what he put under the heading of theology.

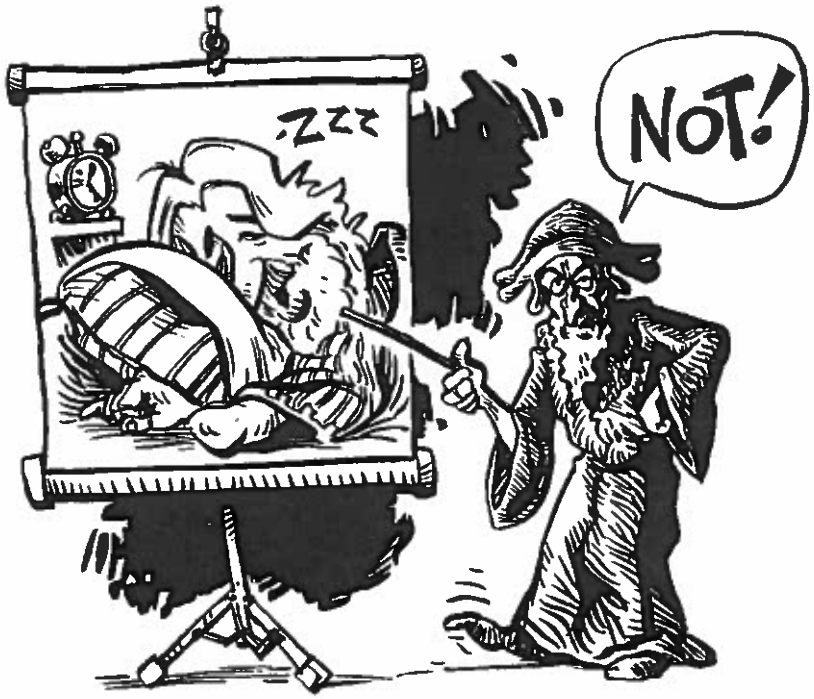
The First Book: How We Know God as Our Creator

What Theology Is and What It Is Not

Calvin seems not to have called himself a theologian. Perhaps he associated the term with the professional scholastic university teachers he called "Sophists." For them, Calvin suggested, theology was a process of "cold" and "arid" reasoning. Cool, detached, and objective, it lacked passion. It had no heat. For Calvin, theology had to be hot, that is, it had to engage the emotions—the heart and the soul. If theology was idle speculation, an exercise of indulging our curiosity, then busy people who want to know about life's vital questions should throw it out! (Curiosity was not an attribute to be encouraged, in Calvin's view. He cites approvingly the answer to the old question about what God was doing before the creation of the world: God was building hell for curious persons.)

Theology has to do with the vital questions, questions that cut to the center of our existence. It looks for knowledge, not mere information. It seeks wisdom, not facts (since many facts elude our limited human understanding). There is, in the enterprise of theology, a quest for truth. But theology is not about taming mystery or reducing it to a set of logical propositions. It is, instead, a practical search for a way of speaking about the fundamental questions of our life.

So when Calvin begins his reflections on a Christian theological orientation, he begins with the broadest of vital questions—Who is God? Who am I?—what he calls the



knowledge of God and of ourselves. Like reflection on chickens and eggs, thinking about what we know of God and ourselves involves us in a quandary. Which comes first? With which should we begin? It is impossible to decide. On one hand, it seems that we would need to have an understanding of who we are before we set about to contemplate more lofty matters. But we cannot think about ourselves without thinking about where we have come from, about the one who has created us, the one in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). On the other hand, we don't have a clear vision of ourselves unless we look at the one who is our Creator. Rather than choosing one or the other as a starting point, Calvin says we need to look at both. We need to consider the *relation* of God and ourselves. And that will mean moving back and forth between

reflection on who God is and who we human beings are, in the context of this relation.

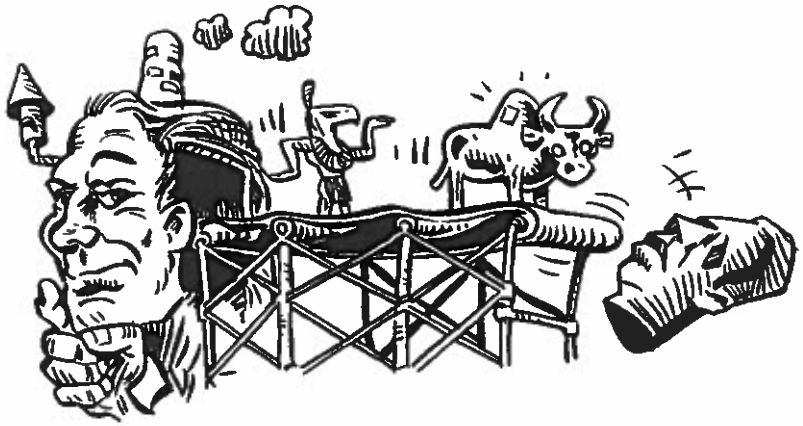
It is worth noting one of the things Calvin refuses to do as he begins the process of theological reflection. He does not pause to prove God's existence. This is because Calvin did not think that theological reflection had to do with laying a rational basis for faith or belief. Instead, theology assumed faith. Like the eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), theology for Calvin was "faith seeking understanding." He felt that all people of faith (and, in fact, all people *period*) knew there was a God. It would be a waste of valuable time to engage in proofs to tell honest people what they already knew, proofs that, in any case, would not convince the skeptical (since they were willfully dishonest). On the other hand, the discourse of theology is not *only* for persons who already possess a firm faith. Theology should aim to persuade skeptics—and Calvin uses his rhetorical gifts to accomplish this—but it won't be persuasive if it tries to build a deductive, rationalistic, or speculative system.

A Primal and Natural Awareness

So Calvin begins by assuming God's existence, assuming that we are related to God as our creator, and assuming that somewhere, deep within us, we know or are aware of God. All we have to do is look at ourselves, Calvin says, and we can see the marvels of God's handiwork. Look at the incredible creation that is a human being: the body with its perfect balance, the intricacies of its anatomy and physiology, its physical beauty. Here, surely, are "enough miracles to occupy our minds." The human soul, mind, or consciousness, with its imagination, intelligence, and creativity, shows "unfailing signs of divinity." And what of the world beyond ourselves? The wonders of nature: the stars in the night sky following their courses, the majesty of Niagara Falls, the grandeur of the Grand Canyon (alright, alright, Calvin didn't know about those last two, but he did have the Alps!). Only the most insensitive of souls can contemplate the universe and fail to experience the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator. Nature is, according to Calvin, a theater of God's glory, "crammed with innumerable miracles." It is a visible image of the invisible God. A pious person can even say that nature *is* God, so clearly does the natural world show God to us. But since, in fact, God is the creative power at work in and over nature, it is better not to confuse the Creator with the creation.

There is something in us, then, that we can call the natural knowledge of God. It is there in us, and we have access to it when we contemplate ourselves and the world. Another way of talking about this is to say that all human beings have a "seed of religion." History and anthropology show us that humans are religious beings. That is, they not only have an awareness of God, they fashion ways of responding to God—through worship and representations

of deity. Unfortunately, in Calvin's view, these are inevitably gross distortions of true religion. Because instead of being content to respond genuinely to God, humans construct their own, distorted images of the



divine. They make and worship idols, their own projections, as fetishes to harness sacred power for their own use. The human mind, according to Calvin, is a "perpetual factory of idols." We prefer, that is, to worship our fabricated and domesticated gods than to respond to the living God. And we are, he says, highly adept at creating these gods; our lives are filled with a profusion of tangible substitutes for the intangible God. The seed of religion takes root in us and grows into a malformed plant that gives bitter fruit.

Idols and Images

Like the early Christians, Calvin associated this penchant toward idolatry with pagan religion. But he believed that it could be found in every historical instance of religion—even Christianity. Religious practice in his own time and place was full of idolatry, Calvin said. It was especially evident in the tendency to equate God's power with material things. People would travel great distances to come to a place that held a piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, a drop of the Virgin Mary's milk, or an image or the

remains of a great saint. They believed that sacred power emanated from these relics and that venerating them was a worthy act. Calvin wrote a scathing attack on popular devotion to relics, pointing out how collectors of holy objects fooled the common people: "St Anne, the mother of the Blessed Virgin, has a whole body at Apt in Provence, and another at Notre-Dame-de-l'Ile in Lyon. She has one head at Trier, a second at Düren in Jülich, and a third in a town named after her in Thuringia. I shall not speak of her other relics shown in more than a hundred different places." He recalled that as a small boy he himself had kissed one of these relics at an abbey near Noyon on a day set aside to honor Saint Anne's remains.[3]

Kissing or showing honor to a saint's relics might seem to be innocent enough. Catholic piety was, at the time, and in important ways continues to be, strongly sacramental, focusing on physical embodiments of the sacred in the midst of life. But to Calvin, this piety violated the first two of the Ten Commandments ("You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" [Exod. 20:3–5]). The official theology of the church distinguished between the kind of veneration offered to saints and the worship and service given to God alone. But Calvin insisted that this was a false distinction, given human psychology and our tendency to worship what is tangible and visible as opposed to the spiritual worship we owe to the invisible God. With Luther, Calvin insisted that whatever a person bowed down to and served, whatever her heart clung to, became her God. And to offer religious veneration to a saint's image carved in wood or to the remains of human flesh was simple idol worship. The

concern over idolatry led Calvin and others in the Reformed movement to reject visual depictions of God, Jesus, or any of the saints. Paintings, drawings, or sculptures of this kind would only encourage the popular inclination to fixate upon the material as opposed to the spiritual.

(And so that guy who appears in some of these cartoons pretending to be God should not be confused with the real thing! He's just playing the role for a moment so that you can get a better sense of what Calvin is saying about God. But the problem, according to Calvin, is that once you've looked at this image, the damage has been done. You've thought of God now as physical, as a human figure, and as male, with body, beard, etc. In other words, instead of receiving what God discloses to us about who God is, you've fashioned God

according to an inevitably flawed, human conception of who God is. And that is a component of idolatry.)

The attack on images—Calvin's iconoclasm—is important because it points to the critical spirit that became a central part of his legacy. Calvin criticized freely the religious ideas and practices of his day. And he did so in order to distinguish truth from error. Errors had become confused with truth simply because they carried with them the weight of custom and tradition. The effort to expose error and distinguish the living God from false and idolatrous depictions became a hallmark of Calvinism and of a number of other related movements in the modern world.

Corrective Lenses

Let's come back to how we know God. We know God through our encounter with the world God has created, but we make a mess of that knowledge. We look out upon

the spectacle of God's glory in nature and we don't see it properly. Through our misuse of the natural knowledge of God, all those evidences of God's goodness have become a blur to us. We need some sort of means of correcting our faulty vision. And, fortunately for us, Calvin says, we have such a means! God accommodates our inability to see by providing us a pair of eyeglasses in God's word.

What is God's word? It is the way God has spoken to humanity from Adam and Eve on; through Abraham, through Moses, through prophets and apostles, God communicates to us. And we have that word, in the present, in the form of Scripture. Scripture, then, is the way we come to know God. There are other sources for the knowledge of God. But only with the aid of the insight Scripture gives can we make sense of those other sources.

A Question of Authority

Calvin, along with Luther and other contemporary Protestant reformers, wanted to establish a central place for the Bible in theological reflection. Scripture, as compared to the authority of the pope and the traditional teachings of the church, was paramount. But to some Catholic opponents, pitting the authority of Scripture against the church made no sense. As Johann Eck, an early critic of Luther, said, "The church is older than Scripture, for when the Apostles began to preach, there was no written Gospel, no letter of Paul, and yet there was the church dedicated by Christ's blood." Moreover, "Scripture is not authentic without the church's authority." Who determined which books were to be included in the canon of Scripture? The church. And what entity instructs Christians in the meaning of Scripture? Clearly, it is the church. So, Catholics argued, the church is the first and more basic authority.[4]

Against these claims, Calvin argued that to place the

church above Scripture is to try to put human authority over the authority of God. In fact, the church is *not* older than Scripture. Scripture is simply the written word of God. And the word of God is as old as God's speaking to humanity. How did the church come to be? Through the calling of God in God's word and the preaching of prophets and apostles who were God's mouthpiece. And, although it may seem to be the case that the church decided arbitrarily which books would be included and which would be left out of the Bible, in fact decisions about the biblical canon were always made on the basis of the authority these books had *already* come to possess in the community of the faithful. It was God's word that established that authority, not the decision of human beings. And so, says Calvin, the authority of Scripture must be recognized as the higher authority. It is the means through which we hear the very voice of God.

But how do we know God speaks in Scripture? We know it because we experience God speaking in Scripture. That is, we become certain that Scripture is God's word to us when God's Spirit testifies to us, or confirms to us, that this is God's word. Here Calvin's reasoning seems to be circular, but the circularity is not unintentional. To try to establish the authority of the Bible by adducing proofs or by appealing to some criteria outside of God's word to us would be to create another authority higher than Scripture, an authority on which we would then have to depend for trusting that we hear God when we read the Bible. But Scripture doesn't need any external proof. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," goes the old saying. And much the same could be said for Scripture. There are no proofs of Scripture's authenticity higher or more effective than the internal conviction of one who has heard God speaking to her through the biblical word.

But doesn't God speak to people in other ways, outside of the Bible? What about the Holy Spirit? Calvin does believe God speaks through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, however, is the "author" of Scripture. As an author, the Spirit speaks consistently—not one way in the book and another way when whispering in our ears. Instead of thinking of the Holy Spirit as speaking independently of the Bible, says Calvin, we should recognize that God's word is the instrument God has chosen through which to teach us. Calvin concedes that not everyone sees the light when they read the Bible. This is because it is only when the Spirit illumines us in our reading of the Bible and changes the dead letter on the page to a word of life that we discover God's word to us. And so, while he placed a great deal of emphasis on the text of the Bible as the word of God, Calvin also recognized that the Spirit must work upon readers and the believing community to make the word a life-giving power in their own time and place.

Calvin thinks of God—in the person of the Holy Spirit—as the author of Scripture. When he says this, he doesn't mean to suggest that the Bible has no human authors or that the function of human authors (e.g., Moses, Jeremiah, Matthew, Paul) was simply to write down words dictated by the Spirit. It would be hard to read Jeremiah or Paul and fail to recognize that profoundly human personalities are present in their writings. No, to say God is the author of Scripture means that God is the one who speaks a message in and through the words of Jeremiah and Paul.

Going to School

Calvin was a teacher, and if those who studied with him can be believed, he was a good one. His humanist training in rhetoric prepared him to use language effectively to

communicate ideas to his students and to lead them, persuasively, toward the truth. It is not surprising then that Calvin depicts God as a teacher and as a master of rhetoric. A good rhetorician knows his audience. He knows their language. He knows what images will resonate with them. He aims precisely at their level of comprehension. He puts the message, in other words, into just the right medium so that it has the desired effect upon his audience.

Scripture, according to Calvin, is like God's schoolroom. It is the environment within which we learn of God and of ourselves. It is not a collection of facts, an assortment of data about God. It is the medium in which we encounter God's message to us. When we turn to examine that medium, Calvin says, we discover that God, the master rhetorician, *accommodates* human understanding in it.

What does that mean?

Calvin thought that educated readers of the Bible in his time, who came to the text expecting its eloquence to reflect the literary values of the Renaissance, would be disappointed. The Bible is not, in his view, sophisticated philosophical discourse. Its stories, poems, chronicles, legal codes, and letters reflect the world and worldviews out of which these particular texts emerged. According to Calvin, God made use of the idioms of ancient language and culture and in so doing "stooped down" to the level of the audience, accommodating their limited ability in order to communicate with them. You might say (and Calvin does say) that Scripture is God's baby talk. Just as adults will alter their speech when talking to a baby in order to suit the infant's capacity to understand, God puts things in terms chosen to suit the capacity of the hearers of the biblical text. We won't be surprised then to find ancient conceptions of the cosmos in texts of the Old Testament. We shouldn't be shocked to find God walking around in the

garden of Eden in Genesis 3. And we shouldn't suppose that this proves that God has feet.

A significant consequence of this idea, when it comes to interpreting the Bible, is that it makes it possible for the reader of Scripture to attend to the very human aspect of the text (the way it reflects characteristics of language, thought forms, and cultural understandings that are historically particular and possibly different from our own) even as she takes the Bible seriously as God's word. The Bible is not some sort of unmediated divine discourse (whatever that might be: perhaps how God talks to himself

when he's shaving, or her interior monologue as she's on the Stairmaster). It is a means of communication that uses the means available in, and appropriate to, particular times and places. And so the biblical interpreter is justified in using scientific tools (linguistics, philology, history, anthropology) in studying these very human aspects of the Bible.

The Creator Revealed

I have spent some time dealing in depth with Calvin's understanding of the Bible and its authority because for Calvin this was a critical piece of his theological understanding. All of what we have to say theologically, about God and ourselves, depends upon how we interpret the Bible.

Now that Calvin has established his view of the Bible's authority he can turn to look at what we learn there about the Creator and the creation. We have already seen that the Creator has to be distinguished from the many idols humans create. But who is that masked man? According to Calvin, not a man at all. (But, given the description that follows, we might be tempted to say *three* men—or perhaps two men and a bird.)

We find, that is, that Scripture shows us God as eternal spirit and as *one* ("Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one." [Deut. 6:4]). But we also find God to be *three*: Father, Son or Word, and Holy Spirit. Although the Bible doesn't give us in any direct way the terms to describe "oneness" alongside "threeness," or to make sense of this apparent contradiction, Calvin claims that the traditional, and orthodox, doctrine of the Trinity—speaking of one divine essence and three divine persons—is the right way of explaining what Scripture teaches. All three persons are, together, one God. Each is eternal. And each represents a peculiar function of God (which we will deal with in due course), although all together are active in each function.

Affirming a Trinitarian view of God is certainly nothing new. But since the Bible itself doesn't really have such a doctrine, and Calvin maintained that all doctrine should be derived from the Bible, it was significant that Calvin chose to make this affirmation. Some of those involved in the reformation movements had suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity—or, at any rate, some of the traditional terms used to express the idea—should be abandoned. One of the most radical critics of Trinitarian understandings, Michael Servetus, played an important role in Calvin's thinking about the importance of the traditional teaching. We will come back to Servetus and his encounters with Calvin in the next chapter.

A Good Creation and Its Creatures

It is this God, whom we discover to be a Trinity, who is the source of all things. God created the world and "it was very good"—or so the self-congratulatory Creator of the first chapter of Genesis seems to have thought. Calvin agrees that creation is good, very good. This creation includes, in his view, spiritual beings: angels and, yes, fallen angels—including a devil. Although that last fact might seem to call into question the claim of goodness, Calvin insists that it

does not. God is in control of all things—even the devil, who can do nothing apart from God's willing. But these spiritual beings are not the center of creation and the focus of God's attention. That honor belongs to human beings.

In humanity we find, says Calvin, "the most noble and excellent specimen of the righteousness, wisdom, and goodness of God." Humans, at the center of this very good creation, are very good themselves. And they are special. As Genesis 1:26 puts it, they are created in the image and likeness of God—which is to say that, apart from all other creatures, they are created by God in such a way as to enjoy a special relationship with God. Biblical testimony of this divine image shows us that there was no original fault in the first humans. They were created with free will—the freedom to choose to do what is good. In all aspects of created human nature, says Calvin, we see mind-boggling reflections of God's glory. It seems Calvin can't say enough good things about humanity as created by God.

This rhapsodizing on human goodness may come as a surprise to those who associate Calvin with a pessimistic view of human nature. (Of course, we should wait to see what he is going to say next!) In some ways, his painting in such vivid colors "the perfect excellence of human nature" sets up a stark contrast with our nature as we experience it *now* (after a certain fall). But that is not all Calvin is doing. He is also pointing us toward God's goodness. God cares for humans. And, as we look at all the evidence of the conditions of our first creation, we see wonderful testimonies to God's wise care and affection for the human creature.

God's Providence

When we reflect on God's relation to the world, it is not enough to speak of God as Creator of the world. That way

of speaking could lead us to conclude that the world was set in motion by God, constructed and wound up as a clockmaker would a clock, and then left to function on its own. Then we would have a view of God as distant from us and removed from everything that happens in our world. That would not be Calvin's God; nor would a spectator God, gazing down from the heavens to see what's going to happen next. The Creator Scripture points to is also the one who continually governs and preserves the universe.

But what sort of governing? Using the analogy of recent U.S. presidents, is God mainly concerned with the big picture, leaving the minutiae of governing to others—

say, like a Reagan or the younger Bush? Or is God more of a micromanager, unable to resist administrative details, on the order of Carter or Clinton? Calvin's description of God leans toward the model of the recent Democrats. Not only does God rule the world by universal laws of nature, "he sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything he has made, even to the least sparrow." God's hands are in everything.

When Calvin speaks of God's providence, he has in mind this conception of God's intimate involvement in the world. And our experience of God's providence leads us to think of God's power. God's involvement with the world is dynamic and powerful to the extent that "nothing takes place without God's deliberation." The view of God's relation to the world that Calvin finds in the Bible suggests that we make a mistake when we try to encourage someone by wishing them "good luck." There is no such thing as luck, good or bad, since every eventuality is a consequence of God's willing and working. It may seem that we are at the mercy of fortune or chance, but in fact God is active in and through everything in every moment.

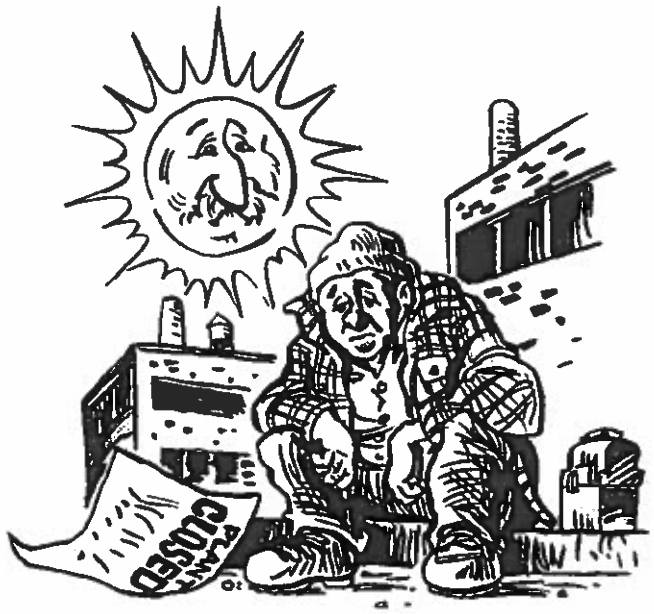
To some critics, that view smacks of what they call fatalism, or a deterministic view of the world. The ancient Greek and Roman Stoics who first expressed this view denied that anyone possessed freedom. Both for God and for humans, what they do is a consequence of an impersonal power called fate. But Calvin claimed that the biblical view is different from the view of determinism. God is free, says Calvin. And so are humans. Even though God is active in everything that occurs, including everything I do, I remain free in my choices. That is, I experience my choices and acts as free and not constrained. They come as the consequence of what I will. And yet, it is true at the same time that God's willing and acting are effective in and through the free wills

of conscious agents (like me and all humans) as well as through the course of natural events (like rain showers, lunar eclipses, or the movement of asteroids). Calvin's point is that this understanding of God's providence doesn't reduce us to the status of automatons or marionettes whose strings are pulled by God.

Even with this assertion of freedom, the idea that "God causes everything" makes some people uncomfortable because not everything that happens in the world is something we think a good God ought to be given credit for. Whether we have in mind catastrophic natural events—tornadoes, death from disease, leisure suits—or the horrible things that happen because of what we humans do, we have to face a troubling question: How can the presence of things in creation that cause enormous suffering be reconciled with the view that God is good? If God "does everything," how can we avoid saying that God is the one who introduces evil into the world?

The simple answer is that we can't. God is active in every human act and every natural event. And yet it would be wrong for us, Calvin thinks, to conceive of God as responsible for evil in the way we ordinarily talk about moral culpability. Why is that? Because when we assess the morality of an act we look at a number of factors, including the *intention* of the one who acts and the *outcome* of the act. We know, says Calvin, that when humans act in hurtful ways they frequently intend harm, and they frequently cause it. But in all of those instances of events that cause suffering, God works to bring outcomes that are, ultimately—and from God's point of view—good. Our limited vantage point does not always allow us to assess this. We cannot see anything like ultimate outcomes. And so the best we can do is to trust that God is acting for good, even as suffering is occurring.

That answer will not satisfy those who cannot abide a picture of God who causes suffering. But it is worth noting that whenever Calvin referred to this understanding of divine providence his language reflected enormous compassion. In a moment of crisis for members of the underground Reformed community of Paris in 1557, he wrote encouraging words to those affected by the threat of violent death, referring to the words of Psalm 56: "Do not doubt that God has an eye on you. . . . Even though he might not stretch out his hand to succor us as soon as we would wish, let us never give up on the conviction that the hairs of our head are numbered, and that if he sometimes allows the blood of his people to be shed, yet he never fails to gather up their precious tears." For Calvin, the idea of God's providence was a great comfort, especially to those who were at the mercy of events and forces beyond their



control. For those enduring harsh persecution, the conviction that God was in control, that God offered "shelter in the shadow of his wings," and that goodness and justice would finally prevail was the basis for the hope that sustained them.[5]

This is a fitting note on which to conclude our discussion of the first major section of Calvin's theological portrait. In this understanding of providence we find a characteristic feature of the Calvinist outlook: We need to rely, absolutely, on God. Book 1 of the *Institutes* is dedicated to that message, and it lays a foundation for its development in the books to follow. Knowledge of God cannot be had by human striving. It only comes when we receive God as God shows God's self to us. We cannot capture God in our images. We must receive the images—the word—that God makes available to us. And we can and should trust our lives, and the course of history, to no power but the power of God.

The Second Book: How We Know God as Our Redeemer

Just as in the first book of the *Institutes*, where "The Knowledge of God the Creator" leads us to talk as well about who human beings are as creatures of God, when Calvin turns to examine how we know God as our Redeemer, he has to deal with who we know ourselves to be, namely, persons in need of redemption.

Sin and Its Source

If somewhere at the heart of the Calvinist view of the world is the notion that human beings must depend completely on God, then Calvin's doctrine of sin is a crucial part of

achieving that view. Calvin says, "We cannot seriously aspire to God until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves."

Being displeased with oneself is not a goal many aspire to these days. Self-esteem is something that, of course, everyone needs, and we see disastrous consequences when a person lacks a basic sense of his or her worth. But there are a variety of ways of achieving a sense of self-worth. Calvin believed that there are some mistaken ways. And the most dangerous of these, in his view, are

those that misjudge our capacity for goodness or for moral improvement. In Calvin's time there were plenty of Renaissance depictions of "man" that were extremely flattering to men (especially the wealthy Renaissance patrons who commissioned these portrayals). We might think of more recent trends that echo this optimistic mentality: all the various "healthy-minded" philosophies of self-improvement that can be sampled in the self-help section of your local bookstore. But Calvin's complaint was that these cheery portraits had to overlook a good deal about human nature, especially the evil of which it is capable. The cost of making one feel good about oneself was overlooking the real deficiencies, in fact the fatal flaw, in the self. And without attending to the disease afflicting human nature, thought Calvin, there is no hope for finding the right cure.

That is one reason why Calvin attends so carefully to sin and why he depicts it in such extravagant terms. Calvin's view of human sin, or human fallenness, is very close to the position Augustine argued against the optimist of his time, Pelagius. When the contemporary songwriter Bruce Springsteen portrays characters who are trapped in circumstances not entirely of their own making but for which they share responsibility, he echoes Augustine's view. "You're born into this life paying/ For the sins of someone else's past," in the song "Adam Raised a Cain," characterizes a particular father-son relationship, but it can be applied more broadly to express the idea of original sin Augustine introduced in the early fifth century. That view was that the first parents of humankind, Adam and Eve, although created good and innocent, through their own choice fell into sin. And that fateful fall affected all their posterity (cf. Rom. 5:12).

The sin of the first humans is known as original sin. The

tradition derived from Augustine equated the sin of Adam and Eve with pride. But Calvin thought that the essence of sin was not pride but lack of faith or trust in God. It was because they first let go of their trust in God that Adam and Eve then fell into pride, trying to assert their self-sufficiency and their independence from God. This primal sin affected not just these two persons but the whole human race. It did so because of the solidarity of humanity in the first members of the race. Original sin, then, determines the condition of every child born into this world. And so, from our present vantage point, we can say that human nature, although created good, is no longer quite so good. Yes, we possess the image of God in which human beings were first created. But it is not what it used to be. Now it is "a horrible deformity." We can see glimpses of what God intended for us when we look at who we are, but only *very* fleeting ones. And they give us no ground for encouragement.