

Chapter 2

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

I. THEOLOGY AND HOLY SCRIPTURE¹

(a) If we wish to grasp the problem presented by the theology of Calvin, our best course will be in the main to keep well in view what he himself tells us about it. This will give to our study the most unexceptionable and solid point of departure. In his chief work, the *Institutes*, Calvin has provided the reader with an introduction. Here he imparts to us his basic purpose in giving an exposition of Christian doctrine.

“My intention in this work”, he says, “has been then to guide and instruct theological candidates in the reading of the Word of God, so that they may without hindrance proceed upon the right lines. I have therefore thought fit to summarize the whole body of religious doctrine and to reduce it to such order that whoever rightly studies it will not find it difficult to decide what he must especially seek in Scripture, and to what end he must judge of its contents (*quem in scopum*). Accordingly if, after fixing these outlines, I give some exposition of Scripture it will not be necessary for me to engage in lengthy arguments about disputed points and to discuss general principles, and I can always try to be brief. Hence the pious reader will be spared trouble and annoyance if only he proceeds to read Scripture with a knowledge of

¹ J. A. Cramer: *De Heilige Schrift bij Calvin*, Utrecht, 1926: *Calvin en de Heilige Schrift*, Wageningen, 1932. D. J. de Groot: *Calvijn's opvatting over de inspiratie der Heilige Schrift*, Zutphen, 1931. R. Bach: “Unsere Bibelnot und Calvins Schlüssel zur Schrift: Das innere Geisteszeugnis”, *Reform. Kztg.*, 72, 1922, pp. 225 ff. M. Simon: “Die Beziehung zwischen Altem und Neuem Testament in der Schriftauslegung Calvins”, *Reform. Kztg.*, 82, 1932, pp. 17 ff.

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this book as a necessary part of his equipment.”¹ In similar terms Calvin describes his intention in the introduction to the French translation of the *Institutes*. The work is to serve the purpose of finding the sum of what God wished to teach us in His Word. “To this end he proposes to treat the principal and most important things which are contained in Christian philosophy.”² According to these fundamental considerations it seems to be the aim of Calvin in the *Institutes* to attain and expound a synthesis of the contents of Scripture.

Of course the *Institutes* itself begins with the words: “All our wisdom, in so far as it is to be held true and perfect, consists in two things: namely, a right knowledge of God and of ourselves.”³ But this first sentence about the knowledge of God and of ourselves is not meant to be the foundation for subsequent speculations of human reason about God and man, but rather, in enunciating this principle, Calvin is already carrying out the programme announced to the reader in the introduction. The latter is not found in the first Latin edition of the *Institutes*; but the French translation already contains in a preface the words just quoted. But it should above all be noted that the first *Institutes* does not contain in its opening the words “all our wisdom”; instead we find unmistakably: “All sacred doctrine consists in two things: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”⁴ Thus Calvin in fact begins in the first sentence of the *Institutes* to expound the sum of what God teaches us in Holy Scripture.

But even if all this were not made so plain, the first words of the *Institutes* could not mean that Calvin in what follows was about to develop his own thoughts about God and man. Theologians and philosophers attempt that again and again; but Calvin knows very well that “all that we think and speak about God or ourselves is but vain folly and empty words”.⁵ The human mind is too weak to be able to fathom and comprehend the being of God.⁶ If we wish to say anything apt about God and His relation to mankind then we must

¹ *OS* 3, 6, 18 ff.

² *OS* 3, 7, 28 ff.

³ *In.* I, 1, 1.

⁴ *OS* 1, 37.

⁵ *In.* I, 13, 3.

⁶ *In.* I, 6, 4.

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be taught by God Himself. This is what happens in Holy Scripture, which alone discloses to us the nature of God and ourselves. "We must go to the Word, in which God is clearly and vividly mirrored for us in His works, and where the works of God are appraised not by our perverse judgments but by the criterion of eternal truth."¹ The fact is "that no one can understand the smallest part of true and saving doctrine unless he be a student of Holy Scripture".² Hence the aim of Calvin's theology seems to be not an unfolding of "*philosophia humana*" but an exposition of the "*philosophia christiana*" which God gives us in the Bible.

But we cannot understand without more ado the "*philosophia christiana*" which God offers us in Scripture. Even in reading Scripture we remain men "who are born in darkness" and "ever more and more are hardened in their blindness."³ Hence Scripture remains for us in our present condition "like a dead and ineffectual thing".⁴ Of course we hear its words and discover its teachings: but we make of them according to our fancy some philosophy or speculative system.⁵

Since our natural disposition is utterly contrary to everything spiritual, the inclinations of our heart must be changed if our study of the Bible is not to be so much lost time.⁶ We must be given eyes and ears to register the truth of the Bible if we are really to recognize and grasp it.⁷ When we turn to God, God effects this change in us through His Spirit.⁸ The Holy Spirit alone is the true expositor of Scripture.⁹ By His agency the word of Scripture is "powerfully imprinted upon our hearts"¹⁰ so that we truly receive and understand it.

When Calvin proposes in his *Institutes* to interpret those fundamental principles of Christian philosophy which God has granted us in the Bible, then, in accordance with what has just been said, it must be remembered as we consider the fulfilment of his purpose that "no one can understand the

¹ *In.* I, 6, 3.

² *In.* I, 6, 2.

³ *OS* 3, 63, 2.

⁴ *CR* 54, 285.

⁵ *CR* 8, 395.

⁶ *CR* 9, 825.

⁷ *CR* 52, 383.

⁸ *CR* 9, 825.

⁹ *CR* 6, 270.

¹⁰ *In.* I, 9, 3.

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secrets of God except those to whom it is given".¹ May we not then describe in the following terms the purpose which Calvin has in view in writing theology: for him it is a question of expounding the contents of Scripture, the "*philosophia christiana*" which he has apprehended and experienced in his own heart as the truth of God vouchsafed to him thus through the illumination of the Holy Ghost? Whereas the philosophers are able to teach only human wisdom and, further, the theologians, in so far as they rely upon reason, merely misuse the Bible in order to extract from it the materials for a doctrinal edifice of their own devising, may we suppose that Calvin reproduces in his theology words and teachings which by the action of the Holy Ghost in response to his faith he has understood as divine words and teachings?

(b) It is thus that Calvin in fact has frequently been understood. Whether, as dictated by our theological position, we say that Calvin wishes to expound the divine word of Scripture as he has apprehended it in faith, or that his purpose is to present the content of Scripture which he has inwardly assimilated, makes no great difference. Calvin in fact is concerned with something quite distinct. Certainly as "one who has received from God more light than others" he wishes to discuss in his *Institutes* the principles of that Christian philosophy which the Bible offers us. He says this quite plainly in his preface, where he indicates also that he does not merely intend to draw up a list of such principles but that he has imposed a certain order upon this sum of religious truth.³ But all this is not the essential. Of course he does all this and must do it; but the purpose which he has set himself is not to compose a synthesis of the divine teachings which in faith he has derived from Scripture in order thereby to instruct his brethren. No doubt to teach is part of his purpose. This is suggested by the very title of his book. But he does not mean that by an exposition of the principles of Scriptural doctrine—which in fact he gives—he can simply impart to his readers the matter which he has at heart.

¹ *In.* I, 7, 5.

² *OS* 3, 7, 26.

³ *OS* 3, 6, 23.

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Calvin, firstly, intends much less. What he says in the *Institutes* is not conceived as an end in itself, but as a sort of key by means of which readers can then find for themselves the right approach to Scripture.¹ The coherent presentation of Scriptural teaching has only the subordinate purpose of enabling each one to know “what he must primarily seek in Scripture and to what end he should relate its contents”.²

But what kind of a “*scopus*” or “end” is it to which the reader of the Bible must relate the whole contents of the Scriptures? And—this question may now be asked—if all that Calvin adduces in the *Institutes* is only meant to draw the attention of the reader to the “*scopus*” of the Bible, what is then the problem of problems raised by Calvin’s theology itself? To this Calvin gives a very plain answer in another preface. We mean the preface to the editions of the Genevan translation of the Bible.³ This preface and that to the *Institutes* are complementary to each other. In the preface to the *Institutes* the reader is referred to the Bible and in the preface to the Genevan Bible he is referred to the *Institutes*.

In his preface to the Genevan translation of the Bible Calvin speaks chiefly about the supreme value and importance of Holy Scripture. Thus he there explains how the reader must prepare himself if he is to study the Bible with profit. This preparation has two aspects: “That we on our part shall be alert and ready, as is seemly, and that we realize the end to which we must strive.”⁴ After saying something on these lines, Calvin continues: “I now refrain from speaking in more detail about these two aspects (the value of Scripture and right preparation for the reading of it) because if this matter is to be rightly treated it requires not a simple introduction but a whole book.”⁵ On reading this, who does not think of the book which according to his own confession Calvin has written in order that each should know “what he

¹ *OS* 3, 8, 5; 6, 19.

² “quid potissimum quaerere in Scriptura et quem in scopum quicquid in ea continetur referre debeat”, *OS* 3, 6, 24.

³ *CR* 9, 823 ff.

⁴ *CR* 9, 824.

⁵ *CR* 9, 825.

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must primarily seek in Scripture, and to what end he should relate its contents"?¹

But what is the end of Bible study? Not that we should seek, in Scripture, food for idle speculations or material for frivolous questions. It is given to us not for the satisfaction of our foolish curiosity but for our edification. "If you ask in what this whole edification consists, which we are to receive thereby, in a word, it is a question of learning to place our trust in God and to walk in the fear of Him, and—since Jesus Christ is the end of the law and the prophets and the essence of the gospel—of aspiring to no other aim but to know Him, since we realize that we cannot deviate from that path in the slightest degree without going astray."² In other words: since the end, the fulfilling of the law, calling us to the fear of God is Jesus Christ and the theme of the gospel inviting us to trust is also Jesus Christ, the aim of all our attention to the Bible should be the recognition of Jesus Christ.

This statement of Calvin is not an isolated one. In a sermon he speaks in similar terms: "When we read Scripture our aim must be to be truly edified in faith and in the fear of the Lord, to become drawn to our Lord Jesus Christ and to recognize that God has imparted Himself to us in Him that we may possess Him as our inheritance . . ."³ Elsewhere we find: "We must read Scripture with the intention of finding Christ therein. If we turn aside from this end, however much trouble we take, however much time we devote to our study, we shall never attain the knowledge of the truth. Again, can we be wise without the wisdom of God?"⁴

From these two quotations it also becomes quite plain why the goal of our Biblical study must be Jesus Christ: He is the Mediator in whom alone God communicates Himself to us. This again is what was implied in our previous statement that Jesus Christ is the end of the law and the essence of the gospel. This means further that law and gospel are not simply words but that they proclaim a word of God through which He reveals Himself to us men: Jesus Christ.

¹ *OS* 3, 6, 24.

² *CR* 9, 825.

³ *CR* 53, 560.

⁴ *CR* 47, 125; cf. *CR* 45, 817; 50, 45.

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Finally we would refer to a passage of the *Institutes* itself in which Calvin expresses himself in a similar way in regard to the word of Scripture: "When by the power of the Spirit it effectually penetrates our hearts, when it conveys Christ to us, then it becomes a word of life converting the soul."¹ This too makes quite plain that Scripture ultimately is concerned with the living Christ. But something else is also implied. When it was stated previously that the aim of reading the Bible is to know Christ, we can now see that this knowledge is a knowledge which the Holy Ghost imparts to us. We have already been told that God the Holy Ghost is alone the true interpreter of the Bible for us. It is by His action that the Word of Scripture is powerfully conveyed to our hearts and that the words of the Bible become the one word radiating the presence of Christ and bestowing it upon us.

It now becomes clear that Calvin, in writing his theology, is concerned about something far deeper than an exposition of Scriptural truths apprehended by faith. The "end" of the Bible at which his work is aimed is, of course, as we have just heard, truth itself: Jesus Christ. But Calvin is not the controller of that truth. He cannot mediate it to his readers; he can only point to it. For the latter purpose he develops his "*philosophia christiana*" of the Bible and expounds in due order the main points of Biblical doctrine. By this theology he can serve the reader of Holy Scripture only as it were by marking out the path which leads to the one end on which the whole Bible is focused. Thus the various doctrines which he explains are so many signposts guiding the traveller again and again in the right direction and preventing him from going astray.² Calvin's design is thus purely and simply to expound doctrine, the affirmations of faith, "*philosophia christiana*". But this exposition of Christian doctrine is not the same thing as the "end" of his theological task. This ultimate purpose lies beyond the immediate one; it is the same as that of the Bible itself; our Lord Jesus Christ. Calvin in his theology is concerned fundamentally about this living Lord; not about certain doctrines which he has extracted from Scripture.

¹ *In.* I, 9, 3.

² *OS* 3, 7, 24.