

## Introduction

The opportunity to reconsider the theology of John Calvin was presented to me by the gracious invitation to give the Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in October of 2009, in honor of the five hundredth anniversary of Calvin's birth. I am deeply grateful to Dan Migliore and Elsie McKee, who extended this invitation to me. I was encouraged to create lectures that were both historical and constructive in nature, so that I might develop themes in Calvin's theology in light of my own contemporary theological concerns. The idea I had for the lectures was to bring the theology of Calvin into dialogue with the claim that God is love, which is slightly different than Calvin's understanding of God as the author and fountain of every good thing. I also wanted to build on Calvin's claim that the goal of our knowledge of God is to be ravished with wonder before the beauty, majesty, and goodness of God, for this wonder reduces us to nothing, and thus provides the best foundation for genuine and profound humility before God. Thus my goal in reconsidering John Calvin is to develop his insights into the knowledge of God and ourselves in light of the understanding that God is love, to provide a fuller understanding of the humility before God to which Calvin summons us, a humility that is ultimately produced by wonder.

I have chosen six themes in Calvin's theology, and have brought them into conversation with other theological voices, in order to create an irresolvable dialectic at the heart of all six themes. The way this dialectic is developed differs in each chapter. In the first chapter, we explore Calvin's passionate interest in the contemplation of the universe by astronomy, in light of his claim that "astronomy is the

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alphabet of theology.” Calvin thought that our contemplation of the works of God should always begin with the heavens, as this presents the clearest image of God in the universe. Such contemplation is directly related to the theme of humility, for we come to a profound sense of our own nothingness by contemplating the immensity of the heavens, and also come to a clear image of the infinity of God by the near-infinity of the heavens we behold. Calvin’s insistence that we be ravished with wonder by the beauty of the universe we behold is rendered dialectical by introducing the voice of Blaise Pascal, who knew through his use of the telescope that the universe is not only beautiful, but it is also terrifying. However, both the beauty and the terror serve to make us more humble, as we realize that we are both at home and lost in a universe of unimaginable immensity and mystery.

In the second chapter, we explore Calvin’s increasing appreciation for the image of God that remains in every fallen human being, and the way he appeals to the image of God to develop his understanding of our love for others, including those we consider to be our enemies. Calvin’s understanding of the image of God is shown to have two distinctive trajectories, one leading to our loving all people equally, without distinction of friend and enemy, male or female; and the other leading to our loving the saints in the Church more than we love those outside the Church, owing to our being drawn by the exceptional gifts of God we see in them. I develop the former understanding of love with the help of Søren Kierkegaard, in order to show how love does not arise from what we see in our neighbor, but rather from a spring hidden in the human heart that flows from the love that is God. We truly learn to love others by first loving God, so that we can love each person individually, yet no one exceptionally, in light of the God-given distinctiveness of every individual. Such love always leads us outside of the self-love of the alliance, which is created by what we think we behold in the beloved, so that love growing out of the image of God is seen to be both the bond and the critique of all social union.

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The next two chapters explore Calvin's understanding of the love of God for Israel, for the Jews, both before and after the coming of Jesus Christ. In the third chapter, Calvin's understanding of the irreducible election of Israel is shown to conflict with his understanding of the Jews as the reprobate people of God. Calvin attempts to solve this dilemma by speaking of an elect remnant of Jews hidden in the midst of the reprobate people of the Jews. Karl Barth is brought in to create the unresolved dialectic of the Jews as elect even in light of their rejection of Christ, so that the whole people is elect even though they do not believe in Christ. However, this position is seen to be unsatisfactory, as it necessarily portrays the Jews negatively, by the shadow cast by their rejection of Christ, and not positively, in light of the inviolable love of God for them.

In order to come to a more positive assessment of the irreducible election of the Jews, I turn in the fourth chapter to another theme in Calvin's theology, the signs of the presence of God in Israel, beginning with the exemplary signs of God's presence in the exodus from Egypt, and culminating in the signs of God's presence in the Temple in Jerusalem, for all of these signs constitute God's eternal pledge to love the children of Abraham. Over against Calvin's claim that these signs cease to have meaning after the coming of Christ, who is God manifested in the flesh, I introduce the figure of Ezra the Scribe, to show how the presence of God is seen to be inextricably tied to the teaching and observance of the Law of Moses after the return from Babylon. This then creates the unresolved dialectic of the need for Christians to acknowledge the loving presence of God in the elect people of the Law, even though they never have and never will accept the preaching of the Gospel.

The fifth chapter examines the different ways Calvin sought to bring each of us to the knowledge of ourselves in light of God's judgment of us, so that we voluntarily confess our sin and nothingness before God. All of these attempts culminate in our being summoned alone in conscience before the judgment seat of God, for this alone is said to lead to the voluntary confession of our own nothingness,

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which is the heart of our humility. Søren Kierkegaard is brought in again to show how Calvin's objective is best reached by placing us each in silence and solitude before the love of God, for the unresolved dialectic of love is revealed by its being our greatest terror as well as our greatest comfort. The love that makes us out of nothing into something also summons us to become nothing in relation to it, so that God might become everything in us.

The sixth chapter demonstrates how Calvin consistently highlights the love of God by placing it within the horizon of the wrath of God, out of Calvin's conviction that we only know love if we know and experience God's wrath, not only towards ourselves as forgiven sinners in Christ, but also towards the reprobate, whom God created in order to unleash the full flood of God's vengeance against them. This pervasive horizon of wrath and vengeance is challenged by the visions of Julian of Norwich, who was not able to see wrath in God, even though she remained convinced of the judgment of God. The love that is God, which is shown to Julian, creates the unresolved dialectic of hoping for all others, and fearing for myself, for it is my own wrath and anger that forms the greatest threat to my relationship with God and others. In a way, the final chapter represents the golden thread running throughout the book, as it directly challenges Calvin's assumption, seen throughout the previous themes, that the love of God is best revealed against the horizon of God's wrath.

In the final chapter, I return to all six themes of the previous chapters in order to explore further the direction in which I would take each theme, and seek to answer some of the questions that my treatment of each issue raises.

The lectures that form the basis of this book were presented live, without a manuscript, using only an outline and notes. The book itself is based on a verbatim transcript of those lectures, and this transcript has been edited as lightly as possible, in order to preserve the oral character of the reflections. It is my hope that this would

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not only make the book of interest to those interested in Calvin's theology, but would also make it accessible to those who are interested in the themes discussed in the book, even if they are neither theologians or even Christians. I would like to thank Martina Mullen for her diligent work in transcribing these lectures.

## 1 | The beauty and terror of the universe: John Calvin and Blaise Pascal

The subject of this chapter is Calvin's understanding of the universe, and we will consider what he says about the stars, the planets, and the sun. This was an area of passionate interest to Calvin, and so I want to consider what he thought about this issue, and why he thought about it the way he did. I am especially intrigued by the phrase he uses in which he describes astronomy as "the alphabet of theology." I would like to explore why he says this, and the various dimensions of that statement. I will then bring in Blaise Pascal, who points out, that with the invention of the telescope and the microscope, the universe is not only beautiful, which Pascal always thought it was, but is also terrifying. That may also explain, I think, why this theme has virtually disappeared in theology. I actually find it intriguing that there are two Frenchmen, Pascal and Calvin, who are theologically interested in the universe, and I cannot really think of anyone else.

So to begin, I have first to create space for this issue in Calvin. One of the most hotly contended issues in Calvin scholarship concerns whether, in fact, the self-revelation of God the Creator in the universe is available in any kind of way to human beings after the fall of Adam. Calvin does not seem to be terribly optimistic at times when he talks about this issue. Echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, Calvin says, "This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, Paul calls 'the wisdom of God.' Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God, but because we have profited so little by it, Paul calls us to the faith of Christ, which,

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because it appears foolish, the unbelievers despise.”<sup>1</sup> So it seems that the self-revelation of God in Creation would have been something from which we could have profited by contemplating it, but because we profited so little by it, Paul calls us to the preaching of Christ, which we regard as foolish. This, in fact, is the rhythm of Calvin’s thought, that he passes from the knowledge of God the Creator to the knowledge of God the Redeemer, and uses this text in the *Institutes* as his transitional text, 1 Corinthians 1.

However, Calvin always had in mind, I would argue, that believers are to move from their faith in Christ back to the revelation of God the Creator because their faith in Christ now reveals to them who the Creator is and what that Creator is like. They now have the eyes to see what they beforehand could not see. Calvin says, “Yet faith in Christ does not prevent us from applying our senses to the consideration of heaven and earth, that we may then seek confirmation in the true knowledge of God.”<sup>2</sup> So Calvin was convinced that what we have come to know of God in Christ, we have confirmed by what we know of God in Creation. Calvin always wanted believers to hold these two things together, for the God we see in creation is the same God that we see in Christ, and these two revelations mutually confirm and mutually reinforce each other.

Moreover, Calvin thought that God did us a lot of favors helping us to see this, not only by sending Christ, but also by giving

<sup>1</sup> Inst. II.vi.1, *Ioannis Calvini opera selecta*, ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–52), vol. III, 320, lines 29–33; hereafter references are in the format OS III.320.29–33; *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 341; hereafter references are in the format LCC 341.

<sup>2</sup> Comm. Genesis Argumentum, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Brunswick: A. Schwetschke and Son (M. Bruhn), 1863–1900), vol. 23, 7–8; hereafter references are in the format CO 23:7–8; *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Old Testament*, 30 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843–48), vol. 1, 64; hereafter references are in the format CTS 1:64.

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us spectacles, my favorite image. Now that I have presbyopia and I cannot read anything in front of me, this is an image of which I am especially fond. Calvin describes the natural world in our fallen state as a beautiful volume, which we can see without our spectacles, and we know it is some sort of writing, just as I know that the book before me is some sort of writing, but I cannot read it. In both cases, I know something is being communicated to me, but I cannot see it properly. So I need Scripture, which acts as spectacles to clarify this beautiful volume, which I otherwise cannot read. Once I have Scripture, I can suddenly see what it is that is being communicated to me. I think that is actually a beautiful image or metaphor. He uses it in the *Institutes* and in his Genesis commentary because it conveys the fact that people do know that something is being conveyed in creation. There is something being communicated, but they just cannot make it out, and so there is a lot of conjecture as to what it could be, but once Scripture is given, you can see what is right in front of you. He says, “For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, God not only makes things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them, as if he assisted our dull sight with spectacles.”<sup>3</sup> I like that, “as if he almost compelled us to behold them,” in other words, LOOK! It is not just that you could look if you want to, but LOOK! And now you can see.

Calvin thinks that God does some corrective surgery in our eyes, as well. God gives us what Calvin calls “the eyes of faith,” so there does seem to be some sort of retinal problems in our eyes along with our need for corrective lenses. And so believers, he thinks, who have the Holy Spirit, and who are united to Christ, actually have the eyes that can behold what is going on in the works of God in front of them and within them. He says, “The world is rightly called the mirror of divinity. Believers, to whom God has given eyes to see, discern the sparks of his glory as it were shining out in every individual creature. The world was founded for this purpose, that it might be

<sup>3</sup> Comm. Genesis Argumentum, CO 23:9–10B; CTS 1:62.



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the theater of divine glory.”<sup>4</sup> That is a very famous line. So the theater of divine glory was founded so that we would contemplate it with our eyes and come to know God through it, and believers now have no excuse. They have faith in Christ, which yields to them the one true God, the fountain of every good thing; they have the spectacles of Scripture, so they can make out what is in front of them; they have the eyes of faith, so that this can penetrate into their inner self, and so they should spend their lives contemplating this image. He says, “Therefore, as soon as the name of God sounds in our ears, or the thought of God occurs to our minds, let us also clothe God with this most beautiful ornament, the universe. Finally, let the world become our school if we rightly desire to know God.”<sup>5</sup> As I have argued in several of my works, this theme in Calvin is absolutely essential to him. You cannot be a faithful person, you cannot be a godly person, you cannot be a pious person, and not contemplate God’s self-revelation in creation.

But what was it in particular that Calvin wanted us to regard? What were we supposed to contemplate in particular? Calvin says, “The Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel within our self, the benefits of which we enjoy.”<sup>6</sup> So what we are to behold in the works of God are what Calvin calls “the powers of God.” These are often translated as “the perfections of God.” We often discuss them as attributes of God. But I think it is significant that Calvin calls them powers because powers work on us. Powers are forces which we experience so that they are not just attributes that could be ascribed to God in an abstract manner, but are actually things that are revealed in what God does, that convey God’s nature to us. God’s nature, then, actually acts upon us. It is not very remote

<sup>4</sup> Comm. Hebrews 11:3, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia, Series ii, Opera Exegetica Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992–), vol. 19, 184; *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959–72), vol. 12, 160.

<sup>5</sup> Comm. Genesis Argumentum, CO 23:7–8C; CTS 1:60.

<sup>6</sup> Inst. I.v.9, OS III.53.14–16; LCC 62.

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at all. It is quite intimate. Of these powers in particular, Calvin's three favorite are wisdom, goodness, and power. There is a lot of discussion of these attributes or perfections of God in Calvin, and many scholars seem to think that Calvin was a very anxious person. This is very popular these days. Calvin is an anxious person! So he is portrayed as looking around for something to allay his anxiety, and he seizes on divine power. He wants something really powerful to take his anxiety away, so he wants power, and that makes him feel safe, that makes him feel secure. That, actually, is the last thing that Calvin would ever say. Power by itself, he thinks, is absolutely terrifying, and if all we know of God is power, we are lost. We are crushed. It just reduces us to nothing.

So Calvin always wants to frame the power of God in the context of the wisdom of God and the goodness of God, as well as the justice of God, the mercy of God, the eternity of God and the life of God. We will see many of these powers in this chapter, but I think it is especially interesting that Calvin focuses on the wisdom of God. He is very interested in the wisdom of God, as the wisdom of God is the disclosure of the goodness of God, and the goodness of God is undergirded by the power of God. But what we will see is that the power of God always supports what the wisdom of God is doing, while the wisdom of God discloses the goodness of God, and the goodness of God discloses God. There has been a lot of interest in Calvin regarding these attributes, perfection, powers, and the like. But I want to argue that he does not just look at power. Power to him is absolutely terrifying. Power is important, but in the context of wisdom and goodness, so those are his three favorites. The three are suggestive of the Trinity to him. He will ascribe goodness to the Father, who is the fountain and author of every good thing, including the fountain of divinity within the triune relations; wisdom to the Son; and power to the Spirit. You can see that these three powers always work together. They are never found in separation, so you never have a power that is not wise or a goodness that is not wise, or a goodness that is not powerful. He does not always, though, reduce