



## HOLY TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Principles, Week #6

Building AND defending: Controversy in the Church

*Bio and introduction to be distributed at a later date.*

---

### **Calvin as a Controversialist**

*by Cornelius Van Til*

1. Calvin's activity as a controversialist began with his "sudden conversion" to the Protestant faith. To become a Protestant was, for Calvin as well as for Luther, to become an Augustinian who tested Augustine's teaching by Scripture.
2. All controversies about the nature of man, his sin and his salvation, must be settled by exegesis of Scripture. For "although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us. For with regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe, how many of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the Creator, and do not rather, disregarding their Author, sit idly in contemplation of his works? In fact, with regard to those events which daily take place outside the ordinary course of nature, how many of us do not reckon that men are whirled and twisted about by blindly indiscriminate fortune, rather than governed by God's providence? Sometimes we are driven by the leading and direction of these things to contemplate God; this of necessity happens to all men. Yet after we rashly grasp a conception of some sort of divinity, straightway we fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh, and corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God. In one respect we are indeed unlike, because each one of us privately forges his own particular error; yet we are very much alike in that, one and all, we forsake the one true God for prodigious trifles. Not only the common folk and dull-witted men, but also the most excellent and those otherwise endowed with keen discernment are infested with this disease.
3. "In this regard how volubly has the whole tribe of philosophers shown their stupidity and silliness! For even though we may excuse the others (who act like utter fools), Plato, the most religious of all and the most circumspect, also vanishes in his round globe."<sup>1</sup>
4. It is not, argues Calvin, that some nations are better or worse than others. It is "the human mind" that spouts forth "an immense crowd of gods."
5. "For this reason, Paul declares that the Ephesians were without God until they learned from the gospel what it was to worship the true God (Eph. 2: 12-13). And this must not be

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. XX, pp. 63-64.

restricted to one people, since elsewhere he states generally that all mortals ‘became vain in their reasonings’ (Rom. 1:21) after the majesty of the Creator had been disclosed to them in the fashioning of the universe. For this reason, Scripture, to make place for the true and only God, condemned as falsehood and lying whatever of divinity had formerly been celebrated among the heathen; nor did any divine presence remain except on Mt. Zion, where the proper knowledge of God continued to flourish (Hab. 2: 18, 20). Certainly among the pagans in Christ’s lifetime the Samaritans seemed to come closest to true piety; yet we hear from Christ’s mouth that they knew not what they worshiped, (John 4: 22). From this it follows that they were deluded by vain error.”<sup>2</sup>

6. “It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us in the right path.”<sup>3</sup>
7. The “invisible divinity” is clearly manifest in all the world about us. “We have not the eyes to see this unless they be illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith.”<sup>4</sup>
8. “That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men’s ingratitude-just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself.”<sup>5</sup>
9. Of special importance is what Calvin says of our knowledge of ourselves. “No one can look upon himself,” says Calvin, “without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ (and has his being) (Acts 17:28).”<sup>6</sup>
10. Calvin refers to this statement in Book I, Chapter XV, p. 183. He now speaks of the necessity of understanding the nature of man’s fall in Adam. “The knowledge of ourselves,” says Calvin, “is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were first created and what our condition became after the fall of Adam.”<sup>7</sup>
11. Man was created in God’s image. But “there is no doubt that Adam, when he fell from his state, was by this defection alienated from God. Therefore, even though we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity. Consequently, the beginning of our recovery of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., book I, chapter XV, section 3.

salvation is in that restoration which we obtain through Christ, who also is called the Second Adam for the reason that he restores us to true and complete integrity.”<sup>8</sup>

12. What is included in this renewal of the image of God in man? Paul comprehends under it “knowledge,” “pure righteousness and holiness” and “what was primary in the renewing of God’s image also held the highest place in the creation itself.”<sup>9</sup>
13. Now the philosophers, Calvin argues, have no knowledge of the fact of the fall of man. Since “this was hidden from them, it is no wonder they mix up heaven and earth!”<sup>10</sup> The “Philosophers, ignorant of the corruption of nature that originated from the penalty for man’s defection, mistakenly confuse the two very diverse states of man.”<sup>11</sup>
14. The conclusion of the matter is that if we are to know ourselves aright, we must know ourselves as being restored to God in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness through Christ—and the gift of his Spirit. As B. B. Warfield puts it, according to Calvin the fallen man needs new light, given him in the Scriptures speaking of Christ and new sight, given him by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.
15. In order that “truth might abide forever in the world with a continuous succession of teaching and survive through all ages, the same oracles he had given to the patriarchs it was his pleasure to have recorded, as it were, on public tablets.”<sup>12</sup>
16. “Now, in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture. Hence, there also emerges the beginning of true understanding when we reverently embrace what it pleases God there to witness of himself. But not only faith, perfect and in every way complete, but all right knowledge of God is born of obedience. And surely in this respect God has, by his singular providence, taken thought for mortals through all ages.”<sup>13</sup>
17. And faith wrought in us by the Holy Spirit is the eye by which we see the light of Scripture as it lightens up all things. “Faith is the principle work of the Holy Spirit . . . by faith alone he leads us into the light of the gospel, as John teaches: to believers in Christ is given the privilege of becoming children of God, who are born not of flesh and blood, but of God (John 1: 12-13). Contrasting God with flesh and blood, he declares it to be a supernatural gift that those who would otherwise remain in unbelief receive Christ by faith. Similar to this is that reply of Christ’s: ‘Flesh and blood have not revealed it to you, but my Father, who is in heaven’ (Matt. 16: 17).”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., section 4, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., section 8, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., section 7, p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., chapter VI, section 2, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., book. III, chapter I, section 4, p. 541.

18. The Holy Spirit always points to Scripture. He gives no man revelations independent of Scripture.<sup>15</sup>
19. In speaking of the Scriptures in the way he does, Calvin tells King Francis I simply embracing “the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself” and defending it against those who persecute them in his realm is *not* defending the subjectivism of the fanatics who pass by the Scripture as a dead letter and appeal directly to the Holy Spirit for revelations from God.
20. In his defense of Scripture as the only final source and criterion of truth for sinful men Calvin is, with Luther, concerned to defend the once-for-all finished work of salvation for men by the death and resurrection of Christ. Both the Roman Catholic church and the “fanatics” make their final appeal to the would-be-self-sufficient man. In starting with a philosophy of Aristotle and building its theology upon it, Romanism has a wrong view of God and with it a wrong view of man.

*The Triune God*

21. What the evangelical cause requires is, therefore, a clear statement to the effect that the true knowledge of self and the true knowledge of God are involved in one another and that this true God is the triune God of Scripture. God is the “one fit witness to himself, and is not known except through himself. But we shall be ‘leaving it to him’ if we conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word.”<sup>16</sup> And God reveals himself in Scripture as the triune God. “Indeed, if we hold fast to what has been sufficiently shown above from Scripture—that the essence of the one God is simple and undivided, and that it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; and on the other hand that by a certain characteristic the Father differs from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit—the gate will be closed not only to Arius and Sabellius but to other ancient authors of errors.”<sup>17</sup>
22. Calvin was therefore much concerned that no one might find any excuse for thinking of the Son and the Spirit as any less God in themselves than the Father. The idea of Sola Scriptura implies and is implied by the idea of Solus Christus. Scripture has no absolute authority except it be the Word of Christ as the Son of God, God in himself as well as the Father given by the Holy Spirit.

*God in Himself*

23. No wonder that those who spurned the Scriptures as the final source and standard for man’s knowledge of himself and of God were also opposed to Calvin’s insistence on the aseity of Christ. Says Warfield: “Particular occasion of offence was given by Calvin’s ascription of ‘self-existence’ (aseity, ἀὐτουσία ) to the Son and the consequent designation of Him by the term ἀὐτόθεος.<sup>18</sup> Calvin made this assertion of Christ’s “self-existence” over against

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., book I, chapter IX.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., chapter XIII, section 21, p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., chapter XII, section 22, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin and Calvinism (Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 233.

Gentiles who “asserted that it was exclusively God the Father who could be so designated.”<sup>19</sup>

*God's Decree*

24. Calvin's theological effort was to set the biblical view of man and God squarely over against every form of man-centered philosophy. It had taken Augustine much of a lifetime after his conversion to set the gospel free from the neo-Platonic-Plotinican notion of the scale of being. Calvin stood on the shoulders of Augustine and therefore saw more clearly than Augustine the need of thinking biblically at every point. The believer's whole philosophy of nature and of history is but a conceptual expression of what Christ, in Scripture, has told him about the past, the present, and the future.
25. All the philosophers including Plato, the best of them, have lost themselves in their round globe. They have suborned their brilliant ability of thought in the interest of “holding under” the truth about themselves as sinners before their creator God. All men are as created image-bearers of God and as such cannot help but know that they are creatures of God and sinners against God. How do I, as a believer in Christ, know that the unbeliever “knows” this? Because Christ has told me in the Scriptures. And how do I know that Christ is telling me the truth on this matter in Scripture? Because he has told me.
26. The triune God speaking to me in Scripture tells me that God spoke to all men in Adam and told him to be a king, a priest, and a prophet under him. But Adam listened to Satan and in so doing assumed that God was together within himself surrounded by factual contingency. This was pure irrationalism. But to know that such was the case Adam had also to assume that he was able to say intelligently that God could not be what he said he was, i.e., the one who had determined the whole course of history from its beginning. There could not be any such thing as a plan of God according to which all things come to pass.
27. Now Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers, especially Thomas Aquinas, had a philosophy and theology that were a synthesis between the man-centered thinking of the Greeks and the God-centered thinking of Scripture. In this synthesis system the man-centered point of view had become predominant by the time of Calvin. In the name of Christ the church was persecuting those, and only those, who truly trusted for salvation in Christ.
28. Calvin as well as Luther came to the defense of Christ's little ones. They needed, he was sure, a manual which would set forth the gospel of justification by faith, clearly over against the basic error of the “mother-Church.”
29. The “story” of Scripture must be told once more, and it must be set forth in all its implications. The believer must be shown what Paul means when he says that believers must do *all* things, whether they eat or drink or do *anything* else, to the glory of God. Believers cannot see what this means and therefore cannot act on it unless they see that things are what they are as revelatory of the plan of God. Those who do not believe this are still in

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

darkness; they are still deluded by the god of this world; they are still where I was before I was born again by the Spirit of God, by the electing grace of the triune God. “Nothing is acceptable with God that is done by his enemies. And all those are his enemies to whom he imputes sin.” This last sentence, says Polman, “is worth gold. It strikes the heart of the Thomistic view and causes the Augustinian truth with its absolute contrast between flesh and spirit to triumph.”<sup>20</sup>

30. Calvin feels in his bones the terrifying thought “that God is the avenger and righteous judge with respect to every departure on the part of those who have thought and said things not calculated to enhance his glory.”<sup>21</sup>
31. Imputed sin, what an unjust and an immoral idea, any good Roman Catholic, any good neo-orthodox theologian, would say. And only those to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed know what imputed sin means. They and they only know that the wrath of God rested upon them for their sin and that now they are redeemed from that wrath by the righteousness of Christ by the electing grace alone imputed unto them.
32. Says Polman: “Thus the grace of God in Jesus Christ, as it alone elevates God’s glory, presenting itself in Scripture and accepted by faith with rock-like certainty and personally appropriated with joy, constitutes the heart of Christian instruction.”<sup>22</sup> Polman is speaking here of the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*. This first edition had an obviously practical purpose. It seeks to set the children of God free from the thralldom of an ecclesiastical policy based on a theology based on a man-centered philosophy. “In complete agreement with this practical aim of the first edition of his *Institutes*,” says Polman, “Calvin deals in it with the election by God of believers in Christ only, in Christ as their head.”<sup>23</sup>
33. The term “predestination” is mentioned only once in the first edition of the *Institutes*. Calvin is concerned with God’s sovereign election of the members of Christ in their head before the foundation of the world.<sup>24</sup> By his decree God controls and directs all things he has created, i.e., the entire course of history, including the daily life and final destiny of every man. The Scriptures teach plainly that, according to his eternal good pleasure without regard to sin or virtue, God has predestined some to everlasting life and others to everlasting damnation. “For Calvin,” says Polman, “Romans 9: 11 is the classical passage on this subject. His conviction is therefore not the product of philosophical speculation but of biblical exegesis.”<sup>25</sup> There is for Calvin no principle of rationality and causality above to which man may or can intelligently appeal for the explanation of themselves in relation to the cosmos. We rob God of a part of his glory if we do not attribute to him the right to determine the ultimate issue of human life and death to man.

---

<sup>20</sup> A. D. R. Polman, *De Predestinatielar van Augustiinus, Thomas van Aquino en Calvyn* (I. Wever, 1936), p. 314.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

*Calvin's Method*

34. From what has been said it is apparent that Calvin's theology required a "Copernican revolution" of the traditional method recommending Christianity to non-believers. The traditional method of apologetics, developed best by Thomas Aquinas, constructed its view of man in relation to God and from the bottom up. Thomas did not think that the "philosophers" mixed up heaven and earth because they did not know about the fall of mankind in Adam. Aristotle's philosophy must not be rejected but supplemented by the Christian story. The Christian story needs theism of the philosophers as its foundation. How otherwise, argues Thomas, can believers show unbelievers that the story is reasonable?
35. Aquinas sought to show the unbeliever that the Christian story is in accord with logic and in accord with fact. Calvin sought to show that "logic" and "fact" have meaning only in terms of the "story." The unbeliever appeals to a "logic" that is above the Creator, creature distinction—to thought in general, human and divine—as identical with being. Aquinas thinks he can satisfy the demands of the unbeliever with respect to the requirements of logic and of thought as such. Calvin requires the "philosopher" to give its proper place to the fall of man and recognize that the creature must submit his logical efforts to the Creator-Redeemer of man.
36. Aquinas thinks he can satisfy the demands of the unbeliever with respect to the idea of facts, as such. Calvin requires the "scientist" to give its proper place to the fall of man and recognize that facts are, and cannot be anything but, expressive of the all-controlling plan of God.
37. Aquinas offers Christianity to the natural man as an hypothesis that, in his open-minded search for truth, he will find to be better than any other. Calvin challenges the natural man to relinquish his claim to be the rightful judge as to whether the claims of Christ to be *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life are true or false and, with true repentance for following the god of this world, prostrate himself before *the* triune God of Scripture.
38. Man cannot know himself except he know himself as a sinner saved by grace. When by the gift of the Holy Spirit he has become a Christian, he has therewith at the same time become a theist. When he has thus become a Christian theist, he looks back to the pit from which he has been dug. "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world, for after that the world by its wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Following Calvin rather than Aquinas, we may today point out that in all the history of thought, except that which is based upon the Christian story, man cannot identify himself. He would have to do so in relation to a world of pure contingent factuality made correlative to an abstract, timeless principle of rationality which, in the nature of the case, cancel each other out. If modern scientists, modern philosophers, and modern theologians would escape their inability even intelligently to ask any question, let alone find any answer, they can do so only by accepting the answer the triune God has given man in Scripture. Without submitting to this God, he is a prophet without a mantle, a priest without a sacrifice, and a king without a crown.

## **Chapter Notes**

*Dr. Cornelius Van Til was professor emeritus of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Van Til received his A.B. from Calvin College, his Th.B. and Th.M. from Princeton Theological Seminary, his Ph.D. from Princeton University, and his D.O. from the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Known throughout the world in the area of apologetics, Dr. Van Til has written and contributed to numerous works, including The Defense of the Faith, The Case for Calvinism, and The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought.*