

# ✓ John Calvin on Creation

by James Olthuis

Although Calvin confesses to be following the Apostles' Creed in the organization of the **Institutes** (II,16,18), another order seems more obvious.

Book I: original order of creation

Book II,1-5: disruption of order in fall

Book II,6-Book Four: restoration of order, by Word (II,6-17), Spirit (III), external means (IV).

Calvin has two planes along which humanity can come to a knowledge of God. There is the special history of God's covenantal purposes and the general history of God's purposes with the entire world. Although these levels are distinct, Calvin does not separate them. The genius of his theology is his effort to rightly relate and interrelate these two levels. On the level of special history God reveals fully only in the Son made flesh, but also through the Mediator even before the Incarnation. On the level of general history God still reveals only through the Mediator, but it is the sustaining rather than the reconciling ordering of the Mediator. Redemptive history presupposes and implies the right ordering of creation by the Creator God. Likewise, world history depends on and implies the proper directing of the creation to its redemptive end by God the Redeemer. Moreover, since knowledge of God's revelation in general history is only salvific when seen in the light of the special covenantal

history, knowing the Redeemer is to know God not only as Father but also as Almighty Father, as creator. Calvin seeks full unity by asserting that all divine revelations are rightly called the Word of God (I,13,7).

Calvin has a two-fold knowledge: faith received from the Word alone and experience. This corresponds to Calvin's soul/body dualism. Although Calvin does not deny that the human body displays God's glory (he affirms it, in fact), he is convinced that "the primary seat of the divine image (is) in the mind, and heart, or in the soul and its powers" (I,15,3).

Even though he stresses that the knowledge of God is "not obscurely exhibited in the frame of the world and in all creatures," he insists that it is "more clearly and familiarly explained by the Word" (I,10,1) which is the "school of the Holy Spirit" (III,21,3) and the "school of God's children" (I,6,4). Humanity has been placed in the "most glorious theatre" (I,14,20) of the world to be a spectator of the works of God, but humankind's special duty, one of more profit, is to listen to the Word (I,6,2). Consequently, "faith cannot arise from a naked experience of things but must have its origin in the Word of God" (Commentary on John 20:29).

Faith and experience are not only opposites for Calvin. They can complement each other. The truth of Scripture is confirmed, in his view, by experience. Calvin is sure that "with experience as our teacher we find God just as he declared himself in his word" (I,10,2; cf. also I,7,5).

There is a tension for Calvin in honoring his two-fold knowledge. He wishes to affirm the general knowledge of God in creation and scripture, yet finds it necessary to say that "properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety" (I,2,1). He points out that "in addition to the proper doctrine of faith and repentance in which Christ is set forth as the Mediator, the Scriptures employ certain marks and tokens to distinguish the only wise and true God, considered as the Creator and Governor of the world" (I,6,2). It is the use of the word "proper" which points to the ambiguity in Calvin's thought. Obviously what is proper and special for Calvin is not an addendum: it is the real thing. At the same time, he is ecstatic in his recognition of the worth and beauty of nature.

The ambiguity is also apparent when we compare various comments about the pre-Fall situation. There is a "first and simple knowledge to which the genuine order of nature would have led us, if Adam had remained whole" (I,2,1). Humanity in original integrity was "empowered with free will, by which, if he wished, he could have obtained eternal life" (I,15,8). There was "the genuine order of nature, that the fabric of the world should be

our school for learning piety, whence we might be led to eternal life and perfect felicity" (II,6,1). The world as a mirror reflects God and it is the sinful human heart which is not able to receive it.

On the other hand, Calvin points out that "God, for seeing the inefficiency of his image imprinted on the fair form of the universe, has given the assistance of his Word to all whom he has been pleased to instruct effectually" (I,6,3). This is what becomes later known as pre-redemptive special revelation. Here it is not simply fallen human nature, but the creation itself in its primal perfection is insufficient. "Even if man had remained free from all stains, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator" (II,12,1).

### **Creation and Word**

Calvin affirms creation ex nihilo (I,14,20). Providence is a creatio continua in terms of the ordinatio Dei or ordo naturae. "The whole order of nature depends solely upon the command (imperio) or decree (decreto) of God.... The hidden power of God so supports all things, that in order to remain in their state they must obey his word (verbum or mandatum)" (Commentary, Psalm 119:91).

Calvin's use of verbum in this place appears to be significant. In commenting on Psalm 33:4, Calvin notes that the "term word (verbum) is not to be taken for doctrine, but for the method by which the world is governed." Word is not used in this instance, says Calvin, as vehicle for revelation, but as a designation for those ordinations, decrees, mandates, commands by which the world was created and is continually governed, words which proceed from the eternal and essential Word of the Father. "For here we see the Word understood as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father" (I,13,7).

The ordo naturae is dependent upon the ordinatio Dei which proceeds from the essential Word or Son generated by the Father.

Calvin uses the term "Word of God" in various senses. It may mean eternal Son of God (usually sermo). Again it may mean the decree by which the world is governed (usually verbum). Most often Word refers to the message of God, whether the Law or the Gospel. The preaching of the Church is also identified as the Word.

Calvin's preference for Word as the teaching recorded in the scriptures tends to put the other uses in a shadow. Perhaps Calvin prefers to limit "word" most often to the scriptures because the natural order as word only leads to external obedience (II,2,24).

Summarizing, it seems that for Calvin Christ as the Eternal Son mediated the divine ordering of the universe from its very beginning: mediation as sustenance. Christ as the mediator of reconciliation seems to be a special form and instance of the more comprehensive ordering of creation according to the Will of God. Redemption is the restoration and reformation of the creaturely into the proper order of God.

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