

THE "TWOFOLD KNOWLEDGE OF GOD"
AND THE STRUCTURE
OF CALVIN'S THEOLOGY

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Throughout the successive editions of his *Institutes*, there is one aspect of Calvin's summary of the Christian faith which remains unchanged. And that is his conviction concerning what constitutes its starting point and basic *scopus*. While his analysis of the nature and division of this knowledge does undergo expansion and clarification, Calvin consistently begins by telling his reader that "nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and ourselves."

But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves." For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits, shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself. Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God.¹

The importance of this opening remark on Christian wisdom (*sapientia*) cannot be overestimated, since it lays the foundation for all that will follow in the *Institutes*; it is this correlative knowledge of God and ourselves which comprises the whole subject matter of Calvin's theology.

The Knowledge of God and Ourselves

To understand Calvin's conception of this knowledge of God and ourselves,² it is important to note a few of its salient features.

The first such feature is Calvin's insistence that this knowledge derives from a single source in the revelation and Word of God. We know God and ourselves, according to Calvin, only insofar as God makes himself known to us by accommodating (*attemperans*) himself to human capacity.³ This means that Calvin's concept of the knowledge of God and ourselves is wholly oriented to God's revelation through the Word, and proscribes any attempt to overstep the limits and parameters of God's own witness concerning himself; to do so, Calvin is convinced, would inescapably lead to speculation (*speculatio*) about God's being-in-himself and to the fabrication of an idol. Since God is "the sole and proper witness of himself" (*Deus ipse solus est de se idnoeus testis*),⁴ Calvin asserts that we must "willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself," and "conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us [*permitteremus autem si et talem concipiemus ipsum qualem se nobis patefacit*] without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word."⁵ Whenever this injunction is contravened and the human mind succumbs to its natural propensity to go outside the parameters of this self-witness, it ineluctably becomes the "fabricator" of an idol.⁶

Whatever else must be said about Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God and ourselves, this fundamental feature must be borne in mind: the knowledge of God and ourselves, which constitutes the sum of all genuine and true Christian wisdom, is a knowledge given to us by God himself through his Word. It is a knowledge born from and circumscribed within that Word. It has, accordingly, a gift-like character such that to contemplate God from out of ourselves and our own resources is to risk fashioning an idol of our own imagination and rejecting through ingratitude what God graciously proffers to us.

A second feature of Calvin's understanding of this knowledge, and one which is implicit within the first, is his claim that God's essence (*essentia*) is incomprehensible to us, and that our knowledge of him specifically concerns his being and action toward us (*erga nos*). With this claim Calvin chiefly endeavors to distinguish his understanding of the knowledge of God from that of the Scholastics and philosophers with whom he was familiar.

Since God is his own witness, and since he witnesses to himself in a manner accommodated to our limited capability, our knowledge of him refers primarily not to his being-in-himself, but to his being-toward-us. Thus, while Calvin does use the terms "immensity," "spirituality," and "simplicity" on occasion to refer to God's essence, he does so with great caution and consistently refrains from examining their meaning in depth.⁷ When they are employed, they function as "limiting concepts" which suggest that God's essence remains incomprehensible to us and that he is the infinite and self-derived source of all his works. Rather than admitting such inquiry as would investigate God's essence, Calvin disclaims it as a form of bold curiosity, and repeatedly directs us to God's works, to the "near and familiar" manner in which he chooses to communicate himself to us.⁸ We are not to concern ourselves with God "as he is in himself, but as he is toward us."⁹ Inasmuch as all genuine knowledge of God is born from his Word to us, it presumes both our receptivity to his use of means appropriate to our capacity and an awareness that those means reveal not his essence, but what he desires to be toward us.¹⁰ Unlike the "cold" (*frigida*) and unfruitful knowledge of so much Scholastic theology which inquires into God's being, the knowledge of God with which faith concerns itself is of a "practical" nature, since it directly attends to God's relation to us and our relation to him.¹¹

In his polemic with medieval Scholastic theology, this emphasis upon the practical nature of the knowledge of God predominates. For Calvin the theology of the Schoolmen amounts to cold speculation about God's being. Consequently, it neglects the intrinsic relation between the

knowledge of God and a proper honoring of him.¹² Against the common procedure of such theology, Calvin eschews its “troublesome and perplexed disputations,” its “delight in speculation,”¹³ and asserts that the “rule of godliness” proscribes “speculating more deeply than is expedient.”¹⁴ As the following characteristic comment indicates, it is particularly the unedifying character of Scholastic theology’s inquiry in respect to God’s essence which was objectionable to Calvin.

This is the definition of Christian wisdom, to know what is good or expedient, not to torture the mind with empty subtleties and speculations. For the Lord does not want his believers to employ themselves fruitlessly in learning what is of no profit. From this you may gather what you should think of the Sorbonnist theology, to which you may devote your whole life without gaining any more edification than from the demonstrations of Euclid. . . . For “Scripture is useful,” as Paul says, but there you will find nothing but cold chop-logic (*frigidas leptologias*).¹⁵

Because and insofar as Scholastic theology inquires into God’s essence and engages in speculation, Calvin believes that it must be rejected and replaced by that true knowledge of God which looks to his being-toward-us, that is: to his works as they attest what he desires to be on our behalf.

There is a third feature of the knowledge of God in Calvin’s theology which is more difficult to define and which, together with the two mentioned thus far, completes our summary of it here. For Calvin the concept of knowledge denotes more than a merely cognitive or epistemological apprehension: since the knowledge of God is correlative to the knowledge of ourselves,¹⁶ and since this knowledge concerns God’s being-toward-us and our being-before-him, it may be described as an “existential” awareness which transforms and affects its subject. The true knowledge of God, Calvin constantly reiterates, is *self-involving*, since it consists in a basic awareness and consciousness of one’s existence *coram Deo*. To know God in this sense is inseparably related to a stance of heart-felt trust

and reverence toward God.

What is God [*quid sit Deus*]? Men who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort he is [*qualis sit*] and what is consistent with his nature. . . . What help is it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather, our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account.¹⁷

To appreciate the full significance of this third feature of Calvin's conception of the knowledge of God, we need only note how often Calvin points to its inseparable connection with true "piety" (*pietas*) and obedience. As the following representative statement avers, Calvin is fond of describing this knowledge in terms of its immediate relation to the worship and service of God.

Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety.¹⁸

Christian wisdom, or the knowledge of God and ourselves, leads unfailingly to a heart-felt and willing reverence or fear toward God.¹⁹ Consequently, Calvin is able to say that "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience,"²⁰ that "the love of God is the beginning of religion,"²¹ and that "the foundation of true knowledge [*vera scientia*] is personal knowledge [*cognitio*] of God, which makes us humble and obedient."²² Furthermore, it is this feature of the knowledge of God which again emerges in Calvin's dispute with Scholastic theology.

The Scripture has good reason to repeat everywhere what we read here about the living knowledge of God. For nothing is commoner in the world than to draw the teaching of God into frigid speculations [*frigidas speculationes*]. This is how theology has been adulterated by the

sophists of the Sorbonne, so that from all their knowledge not the slightest spark of godliness shines forth.²³

However elusive this third feature of Calvin's concept of the knowledge of God may be, it is clear that for Calvin this knowledge is inseparably related to piety, to that trust and reverence toward God which is, by contrast to all speculative knowledge about God's being-in-himself, an efficacious power which transforms and alters the knower.²⁴

Whatever else might be said about Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God and ourselves, it forms the point of departure for his whole theology, and it is the single most important category within which it may be interpreted. For this correlative knowledge of God and ourselves constitutes the basic *scopus* of his theology or summary of the Christian faith. According to Calvin, this knowledge is born of the Word and revelation of God who, in accommodating himself to our capacity, bears witness not to his incomprehensible being, but to what he wishes to be in relation to us. Therefore, it is a knowledge which has to do with our standing and existence *coram Deo*, with our fundamental awareness of who he is and what we are called to be in response to his Word to us. Though this is but an outline of Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God and ourselves, clearly this knowledge as the starting point or basic *scopus* of his theology is what Calvin seeks to reflect upon and articulate in his account of the Christian faith.

*The duplex cognitio domini and
the Structure of Calvin's Theology*

Though it would seem indisputable that Calvin's theology represents his endeavor to summarize the knowledge of God and ourselves, the nature and division of this knowledge have been much disputed and have led to various appraisals of the structure of Calvin's theology. Therefore, some consideration must now be given to the manner in which Calvin organizes his treatment of this knowledge of God and ourselves. To achieve this objective, it will be helpful if we begin with a summary examination of the positions of Edward A. Dowey, Jr., and T. H. L. Parker on the structure

of Calvin's theology, since both have thoroughly studied Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God and yet have reached apparently incompatible conclusions.

On the one hand, Dowey has made a strong case for a twofold division of Calvin's theology which corresponds to Calvin's understanding of the *duplex cognitio domini*.²⁵ Following the lead of J. Kostlin,²⁶ Dowey proposes that,

From the point of view of the knowledge of God, which is the foundation of Calvin's theological writings, Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559 contains two, not four divisions. Further, the first and much the smaller of the two is the more general and inclusive setting the context and proposing the categories within which the latter is to be grasped. This division corresponds to what Calvin conceived of as two kinds of revelation: the revelation of God as Creator, and as Redeemer. The short Book I of the 1559 edition represents the former, and the whole remainder of the work represents the latter.²⁷

On this interpretation, the arrangement of the material in the *Institutes*, while "ostensibly" following the four parts of the Apostle's Creed (God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Holy Spirit, and the Church and Sacraments), is fundamentally determined by this "twofold knowledge of God."²⁸ What we discover, therefore, in Calvin's theology is a twofold treatment of the knowledge of God and ourselves.²⁹ Book I consists of a treatment of the Triune God as the Creator and providential Governor of the world, and of ourselves as his creatures; and Books II-IV consist of a treatment of the knowledge of God the Redeemer through the Incarnate Son (Book II), and through the Holy Spirit (Books III & IV.)³⁰

On the other hand, T.H.L. Parker has emphatically rejected this account of Calvin's ordering of the knowledge of God.³¹ According to Parker, the analysis of Kostlin and Dowey threatens the unity of Calvin's theology:

To impose upon it the *duplex cognitio Dei* is to destroy that unity and to make it such a badly arranged book that we should be very surprised that a theologian of Calvin's

taste should have professed himself satisfied with it.³²

Rather than adopting this division, Parker argues that Calvin's explicit ordering of the material in terms of the Apostle's Creed must be retained, and that this means his arrangement is Trinitarian.³³ The order of his theology is simply the successive treatment of the knowledge of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Furthermore, according to Parker, Dowey incorrectly identifies the *duplex cognitio*: "We may say, however, that the *Institutio* does in fact reflect a *duplex cognitio*: but the *cognitio* is the knowledge of God and ourselves, a concept that opens every edition. . . ." ³⁴ It is this twofold knowledge which is foundational for Calvin's theology, not the twofold knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer. If it were the latter, as Dowey alleges, then we would have to conclude that Calvin has a natural theology and "apologetic" program, since the knowledge of God the Creator is said to "set the context and propose the categories" within which the knowledge of God as Redeemer is to be grasped.³⁵

These two accounts of the structure of Calvin's theology represent the most important alternatives which have emerged heretofore in the literature on Calvin's theology.³⁶ It should be noted here, however, that Parker's objection to Dowey's position rests largely upon his judgment that Dowey's analysis leads inevitably to admitting a natural theology and apologetic program in Calvin's thought. Though it is outside the purpose of this study to explore the background to this concern of Parker's, it certainly relates to the controversy between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner over the existence of such a natural theology in Calvin's thought.³⁷ Parker objects to Dowey's analysis on the basis of his conviction that it places Dowey squarely on the side of Brunner in this controversy. Since he concurs with Barth's judgment as to the deleterious consequences of a natural theology, Parker strenuously repudiates Dowey's position as incompatible with the one he espouses. A resolution of this dispute requires, therefore, an examination as to whether Parker's conviction can be substantiated.

Though superficially the respective positions of Dowey and Parker seem incompatible, on closer investigation this appears to be more a matter of perception than of reality. Parker, for example, seriously misconstrues the implications of Dowey's analysis of the structure of Calvin's theology in terms of the twofold knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer. He specifically ignores Dowey's careful distinction between the "historical" or "logical order" and *ordo cognoscendi* in his analysis of the *Institutes*, and his designation of the relation between the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer as a "double presupposition." On the first point, Dowey states:

The final arrangement of the *Institutes* proceeds in a more or less historical and logical order from God, to creation, to the Fall of man and the need for Christ, to Christ himself, and to the appropriation of Christ. But we are following the *ordo cognoscendi*, and from this point of view the center of and introduction to the *Institutes* is the doctrine of faith, because the believer actually in his own experience progresses from his own present knowledge and experience of Christ to see with new eyes his needy condition as well as to recognize God's work in creation which had formerly been mostly hidden from him in its religious significance, although continuing to exist.³⁸

If the full significance of this statement is grasped, then there is no basis for Parker's contention that Dowey admits a natural theology or apologetic program in Calvin's thought, despite his claim that we must distinguish, following Calvin, between the revelation of God as Creator and the revelation of God as Redeemer.³⁹

Dowey's use of the terminology "double presupposition" yields a similar conclusion: while he speaks of the knowledge of God as Creator as a "logical or conceptual presupposition" of the knowledge of God as Redeemer--saying no more or less than that the Redeemer is also the Triune Creator--this knowledge of God the Redeemer is an "epistemological presupposition" of the knowledge of God the Creator--saying no more nor less than that we in fact

only genuinely know God the Creator through faith in Christ.⁴⁰ Parker simply fails to appreciate the importance of these points in his criticism of Dowey's position and, consequently, incorrectly adjudges his and Dowey's analyses to be fundamentally at odds. Furthermore, Parker does not adequately account for the important references to the twofold knowledge of God which Dowey cites in support of his view, when he suggests that these merely reflect "one methodological distinction" among many.⁴¹

For his part, Dowey provides an occasion for Parker's suspicion concerning the consequences of his view when he refers to the arrangement of the *Institutes* along the lines of the Apostle's Creed as an "ostensible" and "misleading" clue to the structure of Calvin's theology.⁴² By stating further that the knowledge of God the Creator "sets the context and proposes the categories within which the knowledge of God as Redeemer is to be grasped," he only exacerbates the problem of misinterpretation by creating an impression which he himself disowns, namely, that the former is a kind of "pro-paedeutic or first lesson in redemption."⁴³ It may also be possible to argue that, by emphasizing the *distinction* between the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer, Dowey suggests a sharper separation between them than Calvin himself would permit.⁴⁴ Though Dowey does argue that Calvin's understanding of the law provides an especially fruitful way of uniting his doctrines of creation and redemption, it remains possible to argue that he does not pursue this question of the unity between these two doctrines far enough in his interpretation of Calvin's theology, something which E. David Willis, for example, has suggested in his study of the so-called "extra-calvinisticum."⁴⁵

Though it would be possible to pursue this dispute between the respective positions of Dowey and Parker in further detail, enough has been said to allow our drawing some initial conclusions of our own on the structure of Calvin's theology and his treatment of the knowledge of God and ourselves. It should be apparent from the foregoing that there is no insuperable difference between the positions of Dowey and Parker, and that both can muster evidence for

their respective claims about the structure of Calvin's theology. It was noted that Parker objects to Dowey's position on the basis of an incorrect judgment as to its consequences, and that Dowey overstates his case in such a way as to create the impression that the Trinitarian arrangement of Calvin's theology is a relatively unimportant clue to its structure. If this is true, there seems to be no reason why one should have to choose between their respective positions or consider them to be incompatible and not complementary. In my view no such choice needs to be made and there is nothing to prevent our appropriating the insights of both.

Assuming the compatibility and even complementarity of these two positions, the following account of the structure of Calvin's theology emerges. Calvin organizes his treatment of the knowledge of God and ourselves in terms of the knowledge of God the Triune Creator (Book I) and the knowledge of God the Triune Redeemer (Books II-IV). There are two considerations, accordingly, at work in his exposition of the Christian faith, one being the *duplex cognitio domini*, and the other being the explicitly Trinitarian understanding and treatment of this twofold knowledge. A full account of the structure of Calvin's theology requires an acknowledgment of both considerations. Moreover, if one distinguishes between the *ordo docendi* and the *ordo cognoscendi*, it is apparent that, in terms of the former, Calvin follows a more or less historical arrangement, as Dowey suggests. The *Institutes* treat, in terms of the *ordo docendi*, the *opera ad extra* (here understood in the most comprehensive sense) of the Triune God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies, within the movement and transition between creation, fall, and redemption. Whereas in terms of the latter, the *ordo cognoscendi*, it is apparent that Calvin does not *fully* take up the question of how we know this Triune God as Creator and Redeemer until Book III, when he treats the issue of faith and its "object" (*obiectum*) or "scopus" (*scopum*).⁴⁶ His treatment of this issue, which is itself Trinitarian in nature, while deferred to this point, is presupposed throughout the whole of his theological writing.⁴⁷

It is especially the failure to bear this last distinction in mind which has misled some interpreters in their criticism of Calvin's arrangement of the material, particularly his decision to open with an exposition of the knowledge of God as Creator,⁴⁸ a criticism represented by the appraisal of the Lutheran Wernle that this exposition constitutes a "gewaltsame abstraktion."⁴⁹

What this criticism often ignores, furthermore, is the *function* which this structuring of the material plays in Calvin's exposition of the knowledge of God and ourselves, as well as Calvin's own methodical self-consciousness about the epistemological presupposition for all such knowledge, whether of God as Creator or as Redeemer.⁵⁰ In order to interpret properly this arrangement of the material, it is critically important that this function be understood and acknowledged, for Calvin is certainly aware that his opening section on the knowledge of God the Creator cannot stand alone, but relates directly to what will follow. This awareness means that, though Calvin believes there are legitimate reasons for proceeding in this fashion, he does not believe it possible to follow his exposition when this relation is overlooked.

This function is twofold. Firstly, this arrangement underscores Calvin's conviction that the Triune God who redeems is also the one who creates. While Dowey may state it too strongly when he says this opening section on the knowledge of God the Creator "sets the context and proposes the categories" for the knowledge of God the Redeemer, he correctly argues that the role of this section is to provide a "logical or conceptual presupposition" for what follows. Though this might seem to be a rather obvious point, it is of basic theological importance for Calvin *that we understand the identity of the Triune Redeemer to be that of one who does not forsake his creation*, but who remains faithful and who shows himself merciful in spite of human sin and evil.⁵¹ Secondly, Calvin begins where he does, not to provide an abstract discussion of the knowledge of God the Creator, as is often supposed, or one which bears little or no relation to the knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, but precisely

in order to lead his readers to Christ! This he attempts to do by indicating how *inexcusable* our willful infidelity and defiance of God's will is, and how helpless is our condition without the initiative of God in redemption.⁵² Apart from redemption in Christ, Calvin wants to argue, we stand condemned for our ingratitude and our refusal to live in fellowship with our Creator, particularly in view of his "objective" and revealing presence in creation.

This second function is especially significant and has not received its due in previous analyses of the structure of Calvin's theology. For it indicates that Calvin's decision to order his material as he does is based, in part, not so much upon any absolute conviction that this is the only legitimate way of proceeding, but upon his conviction that this constitutes an *ordo docendi* which serves a *persuasive* function consistent with his theological perspective.⁵³ Rather than beginning with an exposition of the knowledge of God the Redeemer (a likely starting point in view of Calvin's claim that God's Son manifest in the flesh is "the chief of the principles of all revealed doctrine and as it were their hinge"⁵⁴), he consciously follows the example of the apostle Paul in his preaching and teaching, and allows *rhetorical* considerations to play a role in his decision as to how to arrange the material.

The following appraisals on Calvin's part of Paul's proclamation of the gospel support this interpretation of the function of this arrangement and the rhetorical considerations which underlie it. In his commentary on Romans 1:17ff., Calvin writes:

I feel that it is here that Paul begins his controversial matter, and that the main theme [the "righteousness of God"] has been stated in the preceding sentence. His object is to instruct us where salvation is to be sought. He has stated that we can obtain it only by the gospel, but because the flesh will not willingly humble itself to the point of ascribing the praise of salvation to the grace of God alone, Paul shows that the whole world is guilty of death. It follows from this that we must recover life by some other means, since in ourselves we are all lost.⁵⁵

For Calvin Paul begins with a demonstration of our need for salvation solely in order to preserve for God's grace in Christ the whole praise in salvation. Further, in connection with a reference in Acts to Paul's "persuasive" teaching of Jews and Gentiles, Calvin indicates how he construes Paul's regulation of his teaching in pursuing this objective.

I take *peithein*, that is, to persuade, in the sense of "to introduce little by little." For in my opinion Luke means that since the Jews discussed the Law coldly and half-heartedly, Paul spoke about the corrupt and ruined nature of man, about the necessity of grace, about the promised Redeemer, about the method of obtaining salvation, in order to waken them up; for that is an apt and suitable preparation for Christ [*haec enim apta est et concinna ad Christum praeparatio*]. Secondly, when he adds that he was "constrained in the spirit" to teach that Jesus is the Christ, the meaning is that he was driven with greater vehemence to speak freely and openly of Christ. So we see that Paul did not bring everything forward at one and the same time; but that he regulated his teaching as the occasion demanded. And since that moderation is also beneficial today it is proper for faithful teachers to consider wisely where to make a start so that an inopportune and confused argument [*praepostera confuisaque ratio*] might not impede the progress of the teaching itself.⁵⁶

Both of these comments are significant, since they reflect Calvin's judgment that the *ordo docendi* of Christian theology must serve a single objective, namely, *ad Christum praeparatio*. Furthermore, the second is especially illuminating, inasmuch as Calvin attributes to Paul's "persuasive" teaching an order which corresponds to his own in the *Institutes*, and attests his own conviction concerning where one ought to begin in order to achieve this objective. Taken together these comments support our claim that Calvin's arrangement of the material in his *Institutes* is partially dependent upon rhetorical considerations, and serves a persuasive function consistent with his theological orientation, namely, to bear witness to the grace of God in Christ.⁵⁷ These comments also argue against any interpretation which

would sever the integral relation between Calvin's opening treatment of the knowledge of God the Creator and his subsequent treatment of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, since it is with the latter in full view that the former is treated.

Conclusion

If this interpretation of the function of Calvin's arrangement of the material is correct, then the following more complete summary of the structure of his theology seems required. Calvin orders his exposition of the knowledge of God and ourselves, as argued above, both in terms of the twofold knowledge of God and in terms of the four Articles of the Creed. Neither of these is inimical to or exclusive of the other, since the knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer is the knowledge of one and the self-same Triune God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies. The Trinitarian ordering of the material complements the ordering in terms of the twofold knowledge of God by *identifying* the Triune Redeemer with the Triune Creator, albeit without implying a congruence between the revelation and knowledge appropriate to each.

Furthermore, the preceding account of the function of this arrangement indicates what has not been sufficiently acknowledged heretofore, namely, the extent to which Calvin may consciously be following the example of the apostle Paul in structuring a *persuasive witness* to the grace of God in Christ. While there is no absolute claim made for following this order or arrangement, Calvin begins with the knowledge of the Triune Creator, not only to establish the identity between Creator and Redeemer, but also, perhaps more importantly, to lead his readers, step by step, to his basic claim concerning the reality of and our need for the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit. On this analysis, rather than constituting an "abstract" and dubious beginning, his initial treatment of the knowledge of God the Creator is directed to and determined by his desire to provide an "apt and suitable preparation for Christ" or the knowledge of God the Redeemer. Insofar as this is true, the ordering of the material in respect to the twofold knowledge

of God must be granted its own integrity and purpose, which cannot be adequately accounted for when one admits only a Trinitarian ordering of the material along the lines of the Creed.

ABBREVIATIONS

- OS *Calvini opera selecta*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, 5 vols., Muenchen: Kaiser, 1926-1952.
- CO *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss, et al., 59 vols., (*Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. XXIX-LXXXVII), Brunsvigae: Schwetschke, 1863-1900.

ENDNOTES

1. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) I.i.1 (OS III.31). Hereafter English quotations from the *Institutes* will be taken from this translation and Latin quotations from the *Calvini opera selecta*. The first part of this statement reads: "Tota fere sapientiae nostrae summa, quae vera demum ac solida sapientia censi debet, duabus partibus constat, Dei cognitione et nostri." This portion of the statement, which represents a slight revision of the wording of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, first appears in the 1539 edition and in all subsequent editions. See Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) 18ff., for a general discussion of this passage, of its importance in Calvin's theology, and of the revisions which it underwent.
2. Besides that of Dowey, there are a number of studies of Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God. See, for example, T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); Walter E. Stuermann, *A Critical Study of Calvin's Concept of Faith* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University

of Tulsa, 1952); P. Lobstein, "La Connaissance religieuse d'après Calvin," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, XLII (1909) 53-110; and Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931) 29-130. Though I have chosen to speak of three integral features of Calvin's understanding of this knowledge, my analysis closely follows that of Dowey who speaks of four "general characteristics" of this knowledge: its "accommodated character," its "correlative character," its "existential character," and its "clarity and comprehensibility" (3-40).

3. I.xiii.1 (OS III.109). Cf. Comm. Dan. 3:3-7 (CO 40.620): "Deus enim non potest apprehendi humano sensu: sed necesse est ut se nobis patefaciat verbo suo, et quemadmodum ad nos descendit, ita etiam vicissum nos atollamur in coelum." Also cf. II.x.6 (OS III.407); II.xi.13 (OS III.435-436); Comm. John 3:12 (CO 47.61); Comm. Rom. 1:19 (CO 49.23); Comm. Acts 17:24 (CO 48.412).
4. I.xi.1 (OS III.88). Cf. I.ii.2 (OS III.36).
5. I.xiii.21 (OS III.136). Cf. I.iv.3 (OS III.42): ". . . true religion ought to be conformed to God's will as to a universal rule; . . . God ever remains like himself, and is not a specter or phantasm to be transformed according to anyone's whim."
6. According to Calvin, whenever the human mind strays from the *given* revelation of God it becomes a "labyrinth" and the fashioner of an idol. Cf. I.xi.8 (OS III.96): ". . . hominis ingenium perpetuum, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam." See also I.v.2 (OS III.56-57); I.xiii.21 (OS III.137); Comm. Acts 7:41 (CO 48.154); Comm. John 6:19 (CO 47.136).
7. See, for example, I.xiii.2 (OS III.108-109); I.v.10 (OS III.54); I.xiv.21 (OS III.171); III.xx.40-1 (OS IV.349-351). Dowey provides a thorough and insightful treatment of this issue (*The Knowledge of God*, 4ff.).

8. I.v.9 (OS III.53): “. . .in suis operibus contemplerur quibus se propinquum nobis familiaremque reddit, ac quodammodo communicat.” For Calvin such curiosity is innate, yet it leads us away from the only knowledge of God possible to us, that which comes from God’s *making himself accessible* to us by way of accommodating our weakness. Cf. Comm. Rom. 1:22 (CO 49.25): “Nemo enim fuit, qui non voluerit Dei maiestatem sub captum suum includere: ac talem Deum facere qualem percipere posse suoapte sensu. Non discitur, inquam, haec temeritas in scholis, sed nobis ingenita ex utero (ut ita loquar) nobiscum prodit.” See also Serm. Job 33:1-7 (CO 35.52).
9. I.x.2 (OS III.86): “. . .non quis sit apud se, sed qualis erga nos.” Cf. I.ii.2 (OS III.35); III.ii.6 (OS IV.13).
10. Comm. Acts 3:13,14 (CO 48.68); Comm. Acts 7:30 (CO 48.144-145); Comm. Acts 7:32 (CO 48.146); Comm. I John 3:2 (CO 55.331-332).
11. Comm. John 1:14 (CO 47.15): “. . .practica magis quam speculativa eius notitia.” Cf. Comm. John 1:3 (CO 47.4); Comm. John 1:49 (CO 47.36); Comm. John 10:36 (CO 47.253); Comm. I John 2:27 (CO 55.328). For a treatment of Calvin’s appraisal of Scholastic theology, see Armand Aime Le Vallee, *Calvin’s Criticism of Scholastic Theology*, (dissertation) Harvard University, 1967.
12. I.xii.1 (OS III.105).
13. I.xiii.29 (OS III.151): “Molestas et perplexas disputationes. . .obliectat speculandi intemperies.”
14. I.xiv.3 (OS III.156): “Modum tamen quem praescribit pietatis regula, tenere curae erit, ne altius quam expedit speculando, lectores a fidei simplicitate abducti vagentur.”
15. Comm. Phil. 1:10 (CO 52.12). Cf. Comm. Titus 3:9 (CO 52.434): “Tota enim papistarum theologia nihil est aliud quam quaestionum labyrinthus.” Comm. I Tim. 5:7 (CO 52.308): “Nihil autem in Dei schola magis discendum quam sanctae et integrae vitae meditatio: denique

moralis doctrina argutis speculationibus confertur. . . .”
See also Comm. Col. 1:9 (CO 52.81).

16. I.i.2 (OS III.32); II.i.1 (OS III.228-229); II.i.2 (OS III.229-230); II.i.3 (OS III.231). Dowey, *The Knowledge of God* (18ff.), distinguishes between the “correlative” and the “existential” as two characteristics of the knowledge of God. Here I am simply combining them as a third feature of the knowledge of God in Calvin’s theology.
17. I.ii.2 (OS III.35). Cf. I.x.2 (OS III.86-87); III.ii.6 (OS IV.15); Comm. Ezek. 1:26 (CO 40.57).
18. I.ii.1 (OS III.34). Cf. I.ii.2 (OS III.35), where Calvin provides a representative definition of piety:
I call “piety” [*pietas*] that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him--they will never yield him willing service.
19. Cf. I.v.9 (OS III.53); Comm. Ps. 40:7 (CO 31.410); Comm. Isa. 31:7 (CO 36.538); Comm. Jer. 26.3 (CO 38.515); Comm. John 4:23 (CO 47.88).
20. I.vi.2 (OX III.63): “. . .omnis recta Dei cognitio ab obedientia nascitur.”
21. Comm. Matt. 22:37 (CO 45.611): “. . .pietatis initium esse Dei amorem.” Cf. Comm. Jer. 10:25 (CO 38.96): “. . .initium pietatis esse in Dei cognitione.”
22. Comm. I Cor. 8:2 (CO 49.429).
23. Comm. I John 2:3 (CO 55.310-311).
24. Cf. Comm. I John 4:7 (CO 55.352): “. . .vera Dei cognitio amorem Dei necessario in nobis generat.” Comm. I John 2:3 (CO 55.311): “Sumit ergo Iohannes hoc principium, quod Dei cognitio sit efficax. . .Dei cognitio, ut eum timeamus et amemus. Neque enim Dominum et patrem, ut se ostendit, possumus agnoscere, quin

praebemus nos illi vicissim morigeros filios, et servos obsequentes.”

25. See Dowey, *The Knowledge of God* (41-49), for a summary of his argument.
26. “Calvins *Institutio* nach Form und Inhalt, in ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung,” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* (Vol. 41) 6-62, 410-486.
27. *The Knowledge of God*, 41. According to Dowey the *locus classicus* for this twofold knowledge of God is *Institutes* I.ii.1 (OS III.34): “Quia ergo Dominus primum simpliciter creator tam in mundi opificio, quam in generali Scripturae doctrina, deinde in Christi facie redemptor apparet: hinc duplex emergit eius cognitio: quarum nunc prior tractanda est, altera deinde suo ordine sequetur.”
28. In his argument for this arrangement Dowey refers to the following passages: I.vi.1 (OS III.61); I.vi.2 (OS III.62); I.x.1 (OS III.85); I.xiii.9 (OS III.119); I.xiii.11 (OS III.123); II.vi.1 (OS III.320). In evaluating the significance of these passages, it should be noted that they all were added in the final Latin edition of the *Institutes*; they represent Calvin’s mature reflection upon the nature and division of the knowledge of God.
29. It should be noted that this twofold knowledge of God is not congruent with the traditional distinction between “general” and “special” revelation. Cf. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 40:

It is not identical with the distinction between general and special revelation; that is, with the revelation in creation and in Scripture. Rather, the first element crosses the border of the special revelation. The knowledge of the Creator has two sources: creation and the “general” doctrine of Scripture; and the knowledge of the Redeemer has one source, Christ.
30. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 42, provides the following summary of his and Kostlin’s analysis of the structure of the *Institutes*:

1. The doctrines of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, and his creation and world government in general, apart from sin and the redemptive activity that sin makes necessary--and similarly of mankind, apart from sin and the necessity for salvation. (Book I).
 2. The historical revelation and activity of God for the salvation of the sinner, as follows: a) The establishing of salvation through the Incarnate Son, for which preparation had already been made under the Old Covenant. (Book II). b) The application through the Holy Spirit of the salvation given in Christ, as follows: (1) The process of salvation which is realized inwardly by the Spirit in individuals, extending until the perfection of these persons in the resurrection (Book III). (2) The outer means which God uses in this activity of the Spirit (Book IV).
31. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, "Appendix," 117-125.
 32. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 119.
 33. Cf. E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966) 103, note 4:

Parker attends more closely to the Trinitarian implications of Calvin's thought than Dowey does, but he still does not see how thoroughly it informs Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God. He correctly demures from Dowey's view of the structure of the *Institutes*. . . .
 34. *Calvin's Doctrine*, 119.
 35. Thus Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 41. Parker's strongly-worded criticism of Dowey's position is based, as we shall see, upon his assumption that it allows for a fully "Brunnerian" interpretation of Calvin's theology. Suffice it to say that the interpretation of Calvin's thought at this point as well as others has been complicated by the debate between Barth and Brunner over the question of natural theology. Cf. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Century Press, 1946). Though it makes a

fascinating study, I cannot enter the details of this debate here.

36. Cf., however, Benjamin Charles Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970) 193, where he argues against Dowe's position and suggests his own:

I would like to suggest that it is not the *duplex cognitio domini* which underlies the final organization of the *Institutes*, but Calvin's conception of order as that is structured in the correlation of the Spirit and the Word. Thus, Book I describes the original order of creation, i.e., the doctrines of God and man apart from sin; Book II.i-v the disruption of that order in the fall; and Books II.vi-IV the restoration of order, i.e., the Word (Book II) brought to us by the Spirit (Book III) through the external means (Book IV).

I fail to see how this suggestion improves upon Dowe's analysis. In the first place, it is not incompatible with Dowe's position. But more importantly, it utilizes an important motif in Calvin's thought--the conception of order both in creation and redemption--to account for the arrangement of the *Institutes*, though this motif plays nowhere near as prominent a role as Milner assigns to it.

37. For a clarification of some of the complex issues in this controversy, see Dowe, *The Knowledge of God*, Appendix III, "The Barth-Brunner Controversy on Calvin," 247-249; and Pierre Maury, "La Theologie naturelle chez Calvin," *Bulletin de la Societe de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Francais*, LXXXIV (1935) 267-279. Maury argues correctly that Calvin does not accept a "natural theology" in the ordinary sense, that is, a natural knowledge of God which may be appropriated without the mediation of Christ, though he admits a revelation of God in creation.
38. Dowe, *The Knowledge of God*, 152.
39. Parker's conclusion on natural theology (*Calvin's Doctrine*, 26-27) differs little from that of Dowe (*The Knowledge of God*, 146):

Is God then known by means of a consideration of the universe and history? Ideally--or rather, originally, yes. In fact, no. For between the original and the actual stands the Fall, which alters the whole problem of knowledge and revelation.

Because of the willful ignorance of sin all this revelation [of God as Creator, both in the World and Scripture] issues only in a mass of both crude and refined idolatries, in which men alternatively cower in fright or rise in self-justified revolt against the true God.

40. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 238-239.
41. Parker, *The Knowledge of God*, 121. The titles which Calvin gives to Books I and II also present a *prima facie* case against this attempt to minimize the importance of the twofold knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer for determining the structure of Calvin's theology.
42. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 41.
43. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 239.
44. As was evident from an earlier passage cited, this is an important aspect of Parker's criticism, since he interprets Dowey's position as threatening the unity and coherence of Calvin's theology. See Parker, *The Knowledge of God*, 119ff.
45. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*. As noted earlier, Willis sides with Parker in stressing the Trinitarian ordering of Calvin's theology. This does not mean, however, that he rejects Dowey's approach outright, as does Parker. According to Willis, Dowey's analysis of the unity between the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer needs to be strengthened and the distinction drawn less sharply. His own thesis, in relation to that of Dowey, is: "He [i.e., Dowey] recognizes that the *cognitio creatoris* presupposes the *cognitio redemptoris* and vice versa; he does not, however, call attention to the extent to which this is integral to Calvin's thought and how it is made operative partly by the 'extra calvinisticum'" (125, note 4).

The study of Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), also confirms the fully Trinitarian character of Calvin's thought and indicates the unity and coherence between the Spirit's work in creation and in redemption.

46. It is essential to an interpretation of Calvin's epistemology that one recognize how he defers his treatment of our *actual* knowledge of God, given the corrupting influence of sin upon our reception of the revelation of God as Creator, until he takes up the subject of faith in Book III. Calvin's own awareness that actual knowledge of God presupposes faith in Christ is indicated in the following passages: I.vii.1 (OS III.65-66), and II.vi.1 (OS III.320). Cf. Dowe, *The Knowledge of God*, 87, 157-164, 174; Parker, *The Knowledge of God*, 25ff., 66ff.; and Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 105ff.
47. Since I am not directly interested in the question of Calvin's epistemology, no adequate account of it will be presented here. By its "Trinitarian nature" I mean to refer to the fact that, for Calvin, God the Father reveals himself through the Son (his Word or *sermo*), and this revelation is appropriated by faith through the Scriptures as they are authenticated by the inward testimony of the Spirit.
48. Though this criticism is usually associated with the name of Karl Barth, others have similarly criticized this arrangement. For example, Gerhard Ebeling, "Cognitio Dei et hominis," in his *Word and Faith*, trans. by J.W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963) 304ff., argues that it reflects an unresolvable tension between Calvin's doctrine of creation and redemption. More seriously, he alleges that it leads Calvin to speak "abstractly" about the knowledge of God and ourselves, since this knowledge is not wholly controlled by the knowledge of God in Christ.
49. Paul Wernle, *Der Evangelische Glaube*, Vol. III (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1919) 394.

50. Again, cf. Calvin's comment in II.vi.1 (OS III.320): "Ergo postquam excidimus a vita in mortem, inutilis esset tota illa Dei creatoris, de qua disseruimus, cognitio nisi succederet etiam fides, Deum in Christo Patrem nobis proponens."
51. Willis, nicely states this point in connection with his discussion of the so-called "extra-calvinisticum":
 [Calvin] keeps in the foreground the assertion that the Incarnation was not the Eternal Son's abdication of his universal empire but the reassertion of that empire over rebellious creation. This continuity of gracious order over creaturely attempts at disunity depends on the *identity* of the Redeeming Mediator in the flesh with the Mediator who is the Eternal Son of God by whom, and with whose Spirit, all things were created according to the Father's will (*Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 99-100) (emphasis mine).
52. See for example: I.vi.1 (OS III.60); I.v.12 (OS III.57-58); Comm. Acts 14:15 (CO 48.325-326); Comm. Acts 17:24 (CO48.41).

Parker underscores this function (*The Knowledge of God*, 121-125). Unfortunately, he also engages Dowey polemically by arguing that he follows Brunner here in attributing a positive apologetic function to the revelation of God in creation. Dowey, however, nowhere denies Parker's contention that the revelation of God as Creator alone plays no role in achieving a true and actual knowledge of God. Like Parker, he notes that this revelation alone provides no "foundation for faith" and has "an exclusively negative function" (Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 85).

53. Calvin's adoption of this persuasive *ordo docendi* indicates the extent to which he is indebted to a certain understanding of rhetoric in the classical and Renaissance humanist traditions. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Quirinus Breen, "John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition," in *Christianity and Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 107-129; E. David

Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology*, ed. by McKelway and Willis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974) 43-63; William J. Bouwsma, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal*, XVIII (Nov., 1982) 190-211; Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977) 6-8; and Francois Wendel, *Calvin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 31-37.

Though none of these interpreters points out the influence of rhetorical considerations upon the structure of the *Institutes* as a whole, they do provide insight on several aspects of Calvin's utilization of the rhetorical tradition. Each of these is of some significance for interpreting Calvin's appeal to the principle of *persuasion* in structuring his *Institutes*.

First, it is clear that Calvin's writings reflect the influence of rhetorical considerations and techniques in their style and form. Breen (114f.) has correctly identified a number of such "rhetorical traits" in the *Institutes*. Unfortunately, Breen restricts his discussion to Calvin's use of different rhetorical devices, and does not pursue the significance of rhetoric in Calvin's theology beyond these merely formal issues.

Second, since Calvin is aware of the dangers of specious argumentation and of using rhetoric for persuasion, whether the case is true or false, he adopts the "Ciceronian ideal" in which eloquence and persuasion serve to advance the truth. Calvin is conscious of a misuse of rhetoric, and endeavors to reflect the Ciceronian model in which eloquence and persuasion serve the cause of wisdom. See Bouwsma (200-211), Willis (45ff.), and Partee (6-8). For a good discussion of this Ciceronian tradition and the place of rhetoric generally in the middle ages, see Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) 3-30; and Richard McKeon, "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, XVII (January, 1942) 1-32.

And third, because Calvin believes that the truth must become effective in its adherents, or that the act of knowing is inseparable from an active response to what is known, he finds the rhetorical ideal of *persuasion* more congenial and appropriate than the *speculative* ideal of a coherent system of truth derived from valid syllogisms. Calvin's appropriation of the rhetorical notion of persuasion, therefore, is a corollary of his basic understanding of the knowledge of God and ourselves, namely, that this knowledge is not barren and useless, but affects the existence of the knower.

In my judgment, this last aspect, though recognized by interpreters like Willis and Bouwsma, has not been adequately developed in the literature on Calvin's theology. I can only note here that a further investigation of this issue would greatly advance the discussion of Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God and his conception of the structure of a Christian theology.

54. Comm. I Tim., *Argumentum* (CO 52.146): "Tandem totius coelestis doctrinae praecipuum caput et quasi cardinem de filio Dei in carne manifestato commemorat."
55. Comm. Rom. 1:18 (CO 49.22).
56. Comm. Acts 18:4,5 (CO 48.425).
57. This also means that Parker's concern for the unity and coherence of Calvin's thought can be met without denying the manner in which Calvin divides his discussion between the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer.