



LOCUS OF SCRIPTURE'S AUTHORITY IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY VIS –Á- VIS HIS OPPONENTS

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Abstract:

A proper understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture is important for Christian theology and the church. During the time of the Reformation, Scripture was proclaimed as authoritative through the slogan 'Sola Scriptura', but the very comprehension of how this slogan worked was demonstrated more clearly by Calvin than by any other Reformer. This article explores Calvin's dynamic and practical view of Scripture, honed by constant dialogue with the position of his opponents, the Catholics and the Radical reformers like the anabaptists, which established a delicate balance between the Word of God and the Spirit of God, in which the Word of God is inherently authoritative and the Spirit of God is its witness and seal. This dynamic interaction between the written Word and the Spirit keeps Scripture alive and authoritative.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the doctrinal problems in Christendom spring from a faulty understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture. When the nature of Scripture is misunderstood and its authority demeaned, the life of the Church and the theology suffer. The history of theology is also the history of the quest to find the right understanding about Scripture because it is from this doctrine that all other doctrines flow forth. The Reformation is an exemplary movement in which this quest turned the history of the Church along with the western civilization upside down. The nature of the authority of Scripture and its relationship with other sources of the knowledge of God became the focal point of the Reformation. The whole narrative of Reformation hinged on the place given to Scripture in the theological discourse and the life of the Church. Reformers led the movement with the slogan *Sola Scriptura* which means that “Scripture remains the final authority” to decide anything concerning the faith to Scripture.¹ That is why when Luther was asked at the Diet of Worms in 1521 to retract the writings he had produced, he said, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything.”² Reformers gave supreme and final authority to Scripture and all other sources only had relative authority.

Among the Reformers, Calvin’s view of Scripture is dynamic and practical, which is the result of the constant dialogue with his opponents and their errant views. This paper will explore where Calvin locates the authority of the Scripture vis-à-vis his opponents – the Roman Catholic Church and the Radical reformers like the Anabaptists. In his struggle with his opponents, he establishes a delicate balance between the Word of God and the Spirit of God in which the Word of God is inherently authoritative, and the Spirit of God is the witness and seal to it. This delicate balance maintains the dynamic nature of the doctrine of Scripture by helping believers to see Scripture as living and active as mentioned in Hebrews 4: 12, rather than as dead literature. Evangelical theology needs to reclaim this balance to be true to the biblical witness in the contemporary world.

¹ Anthony N.S. Lane, “*Sola Scriptura?* Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan,” in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 327.

² [Martin Luther], “Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521,” *Career of the Reformer 2*, trans. Roger A. Honsby, vol 32, *Luther’s Works*, ed. George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 112.

SOURCE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The Knowledge of God is the focus of Calvin's theology. Though the creation bears witness to this knowledge, it has been marred by the effects of sin. So only Scripture becomes the correct and reliable source of our knowledge of God - "collecting in our minds the otherwise confused notions of Deity, dispels the darkness, and gives us a clear view of the true God" like a pair of spectacles which helps the bleary-eyed.³ Scripture is the result of God's revelation to the patriarchs, prophets and the apostles.⁴ These revelations are recorded in written form as Scripture so that it would be a better assistance lest "the mutability of the human mind... lapse into forgetfulness of God."⁵ So Calvin concludes that "no man can have the least knowledge of true and sound doctrine, without having been a disciple of the Scripture" because God was pleased to reveal himself through the Scriptures.⁶ So in Calvin's theology, Scripture is the sole source through which humankind can know about God because it is the revelation of God .

But contrasting to the claims of Calvin, Roman Catholic Church asserted that the teaching of the Church and its traditions also are sources of the knowledge of God because the traditions "whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession."⁷ For Catholics, the Church is a vehicle through which the unwritten traditions about the life of the Church and doctrines are preserved and transmitted which are parallel to the Scripture. It is only by accepting the authority of the Church and the tradition, one can understand the Scriptures fully. But for Calvin the authority of the Church and tradition are "real but limited, in that both are subject to the Word and therefore to Scripture. They are open to be reformed and corrected, while Scripture is not."⁸

Radical reformers on the other hand claimed to have direct access to the revelation of God. They rejected the written words of Scripture as Law that kills and emphasize more

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, vol 1 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1813), 80.

⁴ Randall C. Zachman, "Oracles, Visions, and Oral Tradition: Calvin on the Foundation of Scripture," *Interpretation* 63, no. 2 (April 2009): 128, accessed August 20, 2017, <http://ebscohost.com>.

⁵ Calvin, "Institutes," 83.

⁶ Calvin, "Institutes," 82.

⁷ H.J.Schroeder, trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 17.

⁸ Lane, "Sola Scriptura?," 324.

on the continuing revelatory process in the work of the Spirit.⁹ For them God's Spirit should be free to speak freshly to humans. In this way they kept the Spirit away from the Word and placed undue emphasis on the Spirit. But with the claim to immediate access to God, Anabaptists replaced Scripture as source of the knowledge of God with immediate revelation by the Holy Spirit. But for Calvin, this is the opposite of the Catholic position. "Calvin rejected any human claim to inspiration by the Spirit in his day apart from the Word. Calvin utterly rejected the claims of fanatics to direct inspiration by the Spirit which rendered the Word irrelevant."¹⁰ For him the Biblical revelation is complete and does not need any addition. The Spirit could only confirm the revelation already recorded in Scripture and the "Spirit is inextricably bound to the Word"¹¹ and "revelation beyond Scripture can just as well originate in the spirit of Satan as in the Spirit of God."¹²

INHERENT AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURE

For Calvin, Scripture has inherent authority. This authority is derived from the fact that it has a divine author. The divine origin is important because the authority of Scripture is accepted only when "we are indubitably persuaded that God is its Author" and because the authority is "derived from the character of the Divine Speaker."¹³ Though human authors were involved, human processes and the multiple human authors are not problematic for Calvin because they were mere notaries who registered what God dictated them. Warfield rightly says, "The diversity of the human authors thus disappears for Calvin before the unity of the Spirit, the sole responsible author of Scripture, which is to him therefore not the *verba Dei*, but emphatically the *verbum Dei*."¹⁴ Because of this divine authorship no outside authority is needed to validate the authority of Scripture.

But with the claim that it is the Church and its tradition which has established the canon of Scriptures and the reverence due to Scripture, Catholics place the authority of

⁹ Karl H. Wyneken, "Calvin and Anabaptism," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, vol 5, *Calvin's Opponents* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1992), 7.

¹⁰ W. Robert Godfrey, "Beyond the Sphere of our Judgement: Calvin and the Confirmation of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 38, accessed August 20, 2017, <http://ebscohost.com>.

¹¹ Karl H. Wyneken, "Calvin and Anabaptism," 7.

¹² Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William Heynen (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 98.

¹³ Calvin, "Institutes," 89; "Belgic Confession," Article 5, Christian Reformed Church, accessed December 2024, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>.

¹⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," in *Calvin and the Reformation* (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 159.

Scripture in conjunction with the authority of the offices of the Church and the unwritten traditions of the Church. This position, for Calvin, would mean that the authority of Scripture depends on the favour of men. Calvin says that the authority of Scripture is not dependent on human opinion because “God alone is a sufficient witness of himself.”¹⁵ In the words of T.H.L. Parker, Calvin says that “men cannot assure us that the teaching of Scripture is from God; only God can do this.”¹⁶ Runia says, though Catholics claim that Scripture is supreme and the tradition and the magisterium are servants of the word, but in reality “being the guardian and infallible interpreter of the other two, it [Magisterium] has the last and final word, and in this way the other two, including Scripture, are ultimately subject to it. The last and final authority, from which there is no higher court of appeal, not even to Holy Scripture, is the Church itself.”¹⁷

On the other hand according to Calvin, Anabaptists “haughtily pretending to be taught by the Spirit... despise the doctrine of the Scripture.”¹⁸ They play down the authority of the Scripture. Even many had claimed that the Old Testament is only for Jews, while Christians can only focus on the New Testament. They give undue importance to the Sermon on the mount which gives the blueprint for the right living of Christians. In this way they dissect Scripture assigning different levels of authority to different portions. But ultimately they confer the supreme authority to the works of the Spirit and not to Scripture, thus denying the inherent authority to Scripture.

TESTIMONY OF THE SPIRIT

To the question how do we know the inherent authority of Scripture, Calvin says that only the Spirit of God could testify to the authority of Scripture. He says that “the testimony of the Spirit is superior to all reason... the word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it is confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit.”¹⁹ This testimony is the “creative action of the Holy Spirit” which produces an immediate and final verdict.²⁰ He is also quick to add

¹⁵ Calvin, “*Institutes*,” 90.

¹⁶ T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 23.

¹⁷ Klaas Runia, “Authority of Scripture,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (1969): 171, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://ebscohost.com>.

¹⁸ Calvin, “*Institutes*,” 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁰ B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed publishing company, 1956), 79.

that Scripture contains the inherent authority and the Spirit's testimony is only demonstration of that authority to us. Warfield says, "It is an illumination of our minds, by which we are enabled to see God in the Scriptures, so that we may reverence them as from Him."²¹ The testimony is a confirmation and the seal of the authority which is already established because of the divine authorship. John Murray comments, "The seal adds nothing by way of content... the authority resides in its authorship and not in that by which divine authorship is confirmed."²² In this way he is closing the doors for any need external authority to validate the authority of Scripture.

The Catholic Church claims to be the external authority which lends its validity to Scripture. Calvin describes the problem and provides the direct solution when he says,

There has very generally prevailed a most pernicious error, that the Scriptures have only so much weight as is conceded to them by the suffrages of the Church... It depends, therefore, on the determination of the Church, to decide both what reverence is due to the Scripture, and what books are to be comprised in its canon... [Apostle testifies] that the church is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.' If the doctrine of the prophets and apostles be the foundation of the Church, it must have been certain, antecedently to the existence of the Church.²³

With this Calvin is not demeaning the authority of the Church or its role because he has a respectful attitude to the Church. He grants the Church the power to interpret the Word of God only as a servant to the Word so that "the church's role in defining faith and practice is always *ministerial*; only the Scriptures have *magisterial* authority."²⁴ In this way he places the authority of the Church and its teaching office under the Scripture and maintains the superiority of Scripture.

Anabaptists were at the other end of the extreme. By their claim to intuitive direct knowledge of God and his will they distorted Scripture and rejected the Old Testament's validity. They were emphasizing more on "the importance of the inner, divine, spiritual presence or the role of the Spirit."²⁵ While the Catholics took the Spirit away from the Word and

²¹ Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," 177.

²² John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 51.

²³ Calvin, "*Institutes*," 86.

²⁴ Michael Horton, "Knowing God: Calvin's Understanding of Revelation," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22.

²⁵ Werner O. Packull, "An Introduction to Anabaptist theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 218. (194 – 219)

made the Church the seal of Scripture's authority, Anabaptists took away the Word from the Spirit and made Scripture without authority. But Calvin's theology would agree with Noble, "It is not that the intuitive direct knowledge of Christ comes to us in a wordless, non-verbal, raw experience which may then be put into an arbitrary form of words either of our own choosing or that of the apostle or prophet. But it is rather that the incarnate and risen Word only comes to us clothed in the verbal Word of gospel and Scripture."²⁶ As Warfield says the "testimony of the Spirit concerns the accrediting of Scripture, not the assimilation of its revelatory contents."²⁷

THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

For Calvin, the true doctrine of Scripture is found in the delicate balance between the Word and the Spirit. Though Scripture is inherently authoritative, the sinful human mind needs the work of the Holy Spirit to illumine the mind so that Scripture would be accepted. Scripture is the Word of God where the revelation in Jesus Christ is recorded, and the Spirit of God is witness to its divine authorship. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to create conviction in our hearts about the inherent authority of Scripture. The Word of God does not become authoritative for us unless the Holy Spirit works in us and illumines the Word. In the same way the Holy Spirit does not go beyond the revelation which is given in the pages of Scripture. This is a dynamic view of Scripture. Scripture is not just a written record but an authoritative record which has the mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit working in it and through it. If one removes the Spirit from Scripture, it becomes dead letter and if one removes the Word from the Spirit it makes the historical revelation of Jesus Christ and its manifestation in Scripture meaningless. Gamble's analysis is accurate when he says, "As the Anabaptists represent for Calvin the extreme of over-emphasis upon the Spirit's influence upon the individual. So the other side of the scale is the Roman Catholic Church, guilty of error in that it has over-emphasized the work of the Spirit in the Church. Both of these extremes had failed to realize the proper unity of the word and the Spirit."²⁸

Calvin not only differs from his opponents, his view of the authority of Scripture is also different from Luther. For Luther, "Word and Spirit... not only belong together but

²⁶ Thomas A. Noble, "Scripture and Experience" in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 288.

²⁷ Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," 167.

²⁸ Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: Word and Spirit, A Case Study," in *The Organizational Structure of Calvin's Theology*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1992): 72.

constitute an indissoluble unity... [like] the heat and the light... or like the voice and breath in speaking... The fact that the external word enters and overwhelms the heart is therefore not the result of an inherent dynamic which the word possesses in itself.”²⁹ It is the Spirit who gives the authority to Scripture. The result of Luther’s conception is, as Hesselink says, “the danger of uniting Word and Spirit so completely as to run the risk of identifying them.”³⁰ But Calvin maintains the balance that the Word and Spirit are related and cannot be separated but they are distinct that one cannot imagine either of them separately.

CONCLUSION

To come back to the original quest for the locus of Scripture’s authority in Calvin’s thought, we can say that Calvin locates the authority of Scripture in its origin in God. So Scripture is connected with the reality of the triune God in which the Father is the author and the one who reveals himself, Jesus Christ, the Son, is the object of the revelation and the Holy Spirit is the mover and confirmer of this revelation. His opponents in the Roman Catholic Church located the authority in the Church itself and Anabaptists in the work of the Holy Spirit. Both of them place the authority of Scripture outside Scripture itself which naturally reduces its absolute authority. Though the Church and the works of the Holy Spirit are important in the scheme of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, Calvin recognizes the subtle subversion and eventual relegation to the authority of Scripture when they are made the source of validity of the authority of Scripture.

Calvin reached this position while working at the doctrine of Scripture in a dialectic conversation with his opponents and keeping the reality of dynamic nature of Scripture in his mind. Alexandre Ganoczy says,

There is a peculiarity of Calvin’s thought which makes his systematic dialectic even more profound, what one might call his conceptual and existential dynamism. By this is meant that the author of the first Institutes manifests little sympathy for static and abstract constructions; on the contrary, he reasons in a dynamic way and in terms of concrete existence. For him, faith is a way of life which expresses itself more in action than in thought.³¹

What Regin Preter said in 1965 is true even today. He identified “Biblicism” and the

²⁹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 38.

³⁰ I. John Hesselink, “Calvin’s theology,” in *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 80.

³¹ Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1988), 186.

“Spiritualism” as two extreme tendencies which tilt the balance of the Word-Spirit equation.³² Some treat the Bible as the book of facts and expect every detail to be correct and locate its authority in the doctrine of inerrancy or mechanical dictation. In this way they forget the dynamic reality of the triune God presented in it, and make the Scripture a dead writing. But Calvin recognized “that Scripture was given to us by God not simply to present us today with truths and doctrines, but also to introduce us to the living revelation to which the written Word bears witness.”³³ On the other hand the ultra-spiritualists of our times use the Scriptures as a springboard to say what they say claiming it to be from the Holy Spirit. We need to reclaim the doctrine of Scripture which establishes its inherent authority. Calvin’s lead could guide us to find this authoritative Word which alone could lead us to an encounter with the reality of the triune God and our redemption.

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³² Regin Prenter, *The Word and the Spirit*, trans. Harris E. Kaasa (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 7 – 15.

³³ R.S. Wallace, “John Calvin,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Martine Davie, Tim Grass, etc. (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 144.

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