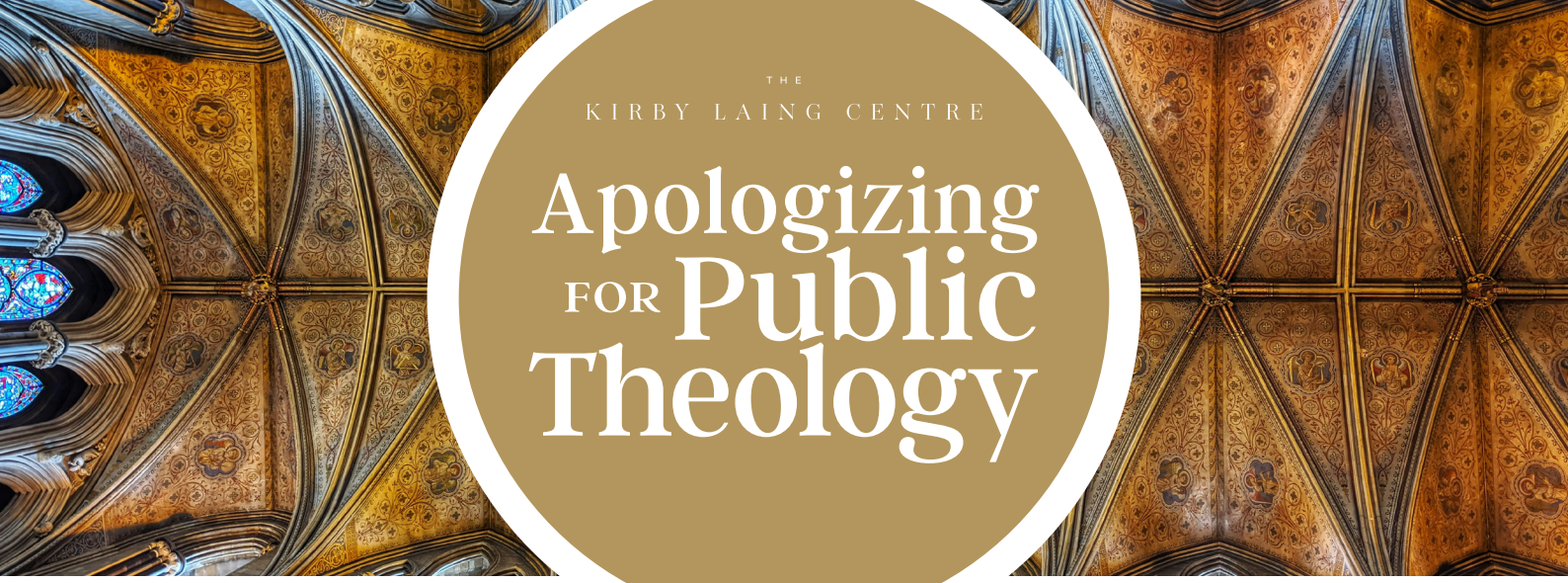

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 13

Calvin as Public Theologian: Knowing God and the Freedom of the Christian

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Introduction | True and Sound Wisdom

One of the finest opening lines in all of Christian writing reads; "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (*Institutes* 1.1.1).[1] With these words John Calvin classically reframed the human encounter with God, setting the trajectory for a work that has profoundly shaped intellectual history in the modern era. Every human activity, every dream, every endeavour, every human thought, Calvin contended, is exchanged *coram Deo*, at an interface with the Creator. For human existence to have any sense or meaning or purpose, one has to "do business" (*negotium cum Deo*) with the Triune God. And doing business with God, our inescapable and central human vocation, is exactly why public theology is necessary.

Historical Context | The Protestant Reformation

Alongside Luther, the Frenchman Jean Calvin (1509-1564), emerged as a principal figure of the Protestant Reformation, and the impact of his thought was nothing short of immense. As the historian David Steinmetz observed,

> there is no Protestant leader in the sixteenth century, with the obvious exception of Martin Luther, who left a more profound mark on Western culture than he did. For more than four hundred years Calvin has influenced the way successive generations of Europeans and Americans have thought about religion, structured their political institutions, looked at paintings, written poetry and music, theorized about economic relations, or struggled to uncover the laws which govern the physical universe.[2]

His impact can likewise be appraised, ironically, by

1 All references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the 1559 edition by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

2 D. C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

the measure of the vilification of his character and the scandalous perversion of his thought. In marked contrast, his contemporary, the erudite and irenic Lutheran scholar Philip Melanchthon, saw fit to designate him "the theologian," a title once conferred upon the Cappadocian father Gregory Nazianzen in honour of his singular contribution to Trinitarian thought.[3]

Person | Calvin's Influence

What is the reason for Calvin's gigantesque stature and influence? Trained in law and the humanities at Europe's finest universities, he came to evangelical faith amidst the swirl of protestant ideas circulating on the continent, and, having given utterance to his newly discovered belief, he unexpectedly found himself fleeing for his life. The story of this shy young man in pursuit of scholarly seclusion yet arrested by God and "thrust into the game," as he put it, plays no small part in his astonishing ascent to continental prominence. Appointed as pastor of the cathedral of St Pierre in the imperial city of Geneva, Calvin, despite considerable travail – even exile, emerged to advance an international movement from its pulpit. Twice every Sunday and each day of every alternate week Calvin preached the Word, and it is primarily through this central public medium that Calvin exerted his influence. Add to this his considerable literary output (the *Institutes*, commentaries, tracts and treatises, letters, liturgical and catechetical writings), weekly consistory duties, the supervision of a company of pastors and an emerging academy, and one can begin to grasp the extent of his unprecedented impact.

Calvin's Theological Distinctive

While an assessment of Calvin's theology is beyond the scope of this essay, one may inquire wherein lay the power of his persuasion? As hinted at in the opening paragraph, *the knowledge of God* was determinative in any theological undertaking. "Today," he wrote, commenting on Jeremiah 9:23-24, "all sorts of subjects are eagerly pursued; but the knowledge of God is neglected … *Yet to know God is man's chief end, and justifies his existence*. Even if a hundred lives were ours, this one aim would be sufficient for them all."[4] Beyond his scrupulous biblical fidelity, we discover in Calvin a comprehensive biblical- theological vision of the Triune God's operation in human salvation. Against the medieval penchant for "toying with idle speculations" (*Inst*. 1.2.2), Calvin favoured the biblical proposition *qualis sit Deus* (who is God), against the scholastic rubric *quid sit Deus* (what is God). If God alone is a fit witness to himself, and is not known except through himself, then the self-revelatory character of the Triune God is an invitation to communion with himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Several scholars have noted the distinctive nature of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity,[5] and that similar to the fourth century, his trinitarian vision constituted a revolution in *knowing God*,[6] ensuring "that Protestantism, instead of becoming just another schism produced by a revolt against abuses in the medieval church, developed instead into a new type of Christianity [as opposed to the medieval consensus]."[7] What is held as *sine qua non* for any *Christian* public engagement, namely the indispensable priority of the knowledge of God, was bequeathed by Calvin.

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Calvin's Public Theology: Culture

How does Calvin's theological vision translate into the Christian meaning of public life? In contrast to the austerity and de-sacralisation often associated with him, Calvin saw humanity as inherently spiritual or religious – having innately the "seed of religion" (*semen religionis*) and a "sense of the divine" (*sensus divinitatis*, cf. *Inst*. 1.4.4). By emphasising the value of common grace,

3 For this claim see T. F. Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin," in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 21-22.

4 Emphasis mine. Calvin saw in redemption a call to re-humanisation in Christ and a re-initiation of the cultural mandate. Similarly, he did not view creation negatively, but positively, as the province of God's glory; as "this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth replenished with numberless wonders" (2.6.1, cf. 1.5.8).

5 Foremost was Warfield, who noted that Calvin's distinctive trinitarian formulation marked "an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the trinity." B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1956), 230, 283.

6 Houston remarked "that the greatest impact made upon the Christianisation of the world of the fourth century, as upon the sixteenth century, [was] the recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity." James M. Houston, "Knowing God: The Transmission of Reformed Theology," in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honour of J. I. Packer*, ed. D. Lewis and A. E. McGrath (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 236-237.

7 Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 197-198.

and the *imago dei* within *all* humanity, he sought to deconstruct the medieval dichotomy between sacred and secular, even finding redemptive value in the cultural contribution of unbelievers.[8] Such cultural generosity was carefully balanced against exposing a culture turned in upon itself to the corrupting effects of misguided worship, recognising the heart to be "a veritable idol factory" (*Inst*. 1.11.8). In terms of vocation, Calvin radically proposed that no single vocation was more sacred than another,[9] or, as Georgia Harkness put it; "whereas Luther had asserted the possibility that one can 'serve God *within* one's calling,' Calvin took the bolder step of claiming that one can 'serve God *by* one's calling.'"[10] Calvin extended this same charity to the arts, despite accusations of being "hostile to the arts" (Voltaire) and an "enemy of all pleasure and diversion" (Douen). In Calvin's wake and beyond the iconoclasm sometimes associated with him, he birthed an aesthetic of biblical simplicity and inwardness that reshaped an idolatrous visual culture. Against the medieval symbolism and superstition of his age, Calvin taught a spirituality of everyday life within which the quotidian and mundane again became worthy subjects of Christian spirituality. This renewed vision of truth and beauty came to flower during the 17th century Dutch golden age in particular. Finally, the formation of the Genevan Academy confirmed Calvin's intention to foster Christian pursuit in the sciences and the arts – public theology at its best – and his followers sought to apply his thoughts to every form of human endeavour: history, law, the arts, economics, literature, philosophy, science, business, music, medicine, journalism and so forth.

Calvin's Public Theology: Politics and Freedom

Frequently maligned as the "dictator of Geneva" (Bainton) or "as undemocratic and authoritarian as possible" (Troeltsch), was Calvin's public theology politically oppressive? Or is it more accurate to present him as the "patron of modern human rights" (Knudson) and "the first stronghold of liberty in modern times" (Borgeaud)? Such divergence in opinion is suggestive of spiritual powers in conflict within the public domain. It is demonstrably true that Calvin lay a foundation for

8 Deeply indebted to classical thought himself, Calvin argued that despite the fall, "a universal apprehension of reason and understanding is by nature implanted in men … bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious, … [and] is rightly counted among natural gifts … this being a peculiar gift of God" (Inst. 2.3.3). However, these "virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favour … [and] must be considered worthless," the light "choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively" (*Inst*. 2.3.4; 2.2.12).

9 "[I]t is all one in the sight of God what a person's manner is in this world, inasmuch as this diversity does not hinder agreement in piety." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 20,25.

10 Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 179, cited by Leland Ryken in "Calvinism and Literature," in *Calvin and Culture*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010), 99.

Samuel Colman, *The Rock of Salvation* (1837)

the separation of the powers, civil liberty, individual and religious rights and even liberal democracy.[11] Fundamental to his understanding of the gospel was the notion of human freedom, and American historian George Bancroft accurately asserted that he who was a "fanatic for Calvinism was a fanatic for liberty."[12] Calvin dedicated several chapters to this subject in his *Institutes*, including a lucid exposition on the two kingdoms, spiritual and civil (3.19.15), and notably, following years of personal conflict with civic authority and its overreach, a final chapter (4.20.1-32) brilliant in innovative ideas and remarkable in its prescience regarding the abuses to follow in the centuries after. Far from utilising magisterial powers to his advantage, Calvin, whilst upholding the God-ordained authority of the magistrate, fought vigorously against its coercive character and potential overreach into the church (cf. *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* 1541). Insisting on the separation of the offices and operations of church and state, Calvin charted a narrow course between those who tended to subordinate or withdraw the church from the state (e.g. Lutheran Erastianism and Anabaptist sectarianism) and those who would subordinate the state to its power (e.g. Papal supremacy and hierocracy). Combining the rule of law, democratic process and individual liberty within both church and state, Calvin thus lay the foundation for modern constitutionalism. In following generations, starting with Theodore Beza, Calvin's ideas were fruitfully furthered by Johannes Althusius in the Netherlands, John Milton in the English-speaking world, and later by the neo- Calvinists, Abraham Kuyper in particular. Kuyper's development of sphere sovereignty and confessional pluralism, both essential components of a truly Christian public theology, are just two examples of achievements rooted in Calvin.

Conclusion | Calvin, a Man Subdued by God

Bernard Cottret observed that Calvin "was a man of order in a world swept along by change."[13] Nonetheless, the caricature of him as dictatorial iron-theologician does not match his accent on knowing God, nor his personal seal of a burning heart inscribed with the motto "my heart I offer, Lord, to Thee eagerly and earnestly."[14] Calvin never forgot his status as a refugee for Christ, and the *Institutes* remains a charter for the public freedom of the Christian. Ford Lewis Battles summarised it like this:

> To many Christians whose worship was proscribed under hostile governments, this book has supplied the courage to endure. Wherever in the crises of history social foundations are shaken and men's hearts quail, the pages of this classic are searched with fresh respect. … [*The Institutes*] sprang from the vivid experience of a gifted young man amid the revival of Scriptural Christianity that marked the Protestant Reformation. We have every reason to believe that Calvin's convictions were born of struggle and anguish … it is in fact a perpetually cogent defence of persecuted adherents of Scriptural faith.[15]

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11 As a trained lawyer, Calvin was able to construct over a hundred statutes for the city welfare of Geneva. In recognition of this, the other Genevan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, remarked: "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognise the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much credit as his *Institutes* … [S]o long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence." *Du Contrat Social* (1762), 2, 7n., in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Pocket Books, 1967), 44n., cited in John Witte Jr., "Law, Authority, and Liberty in Early Calvinism," in *Calvin and Culture*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010), 39.

12 American historian George Bancroft cited in Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures in Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 78.

13 Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 289. See also the influential biography by William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

14 "*cor meum tibi offero domine prompte et sincere*"

15 F. L. Battles, Translator's "Introduction" to Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559. It is important to be reminded that every edition of the Institutes began with a petition to King Francis I on behalf of the persecuted Protestants in France, to "defend the church against [political] furies" and against "overbearing tyranny" against which a Christian must "venture boldly to groan for freedom" (1536 *Inst*. 6.55).