

## **6 / Jacob Klapwijk**

### *John Calvin (1509-1564)*

In this essay we turn to the beginning of Modern Times. There is a world of difference between the cultural climate of the Middle Ages, dominated by thinkers like Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, and the intellectual development from the sixteenth century up to the present. To clarify the scope of the transition which took place as Europe entered a turbulent new era, one could mention any number of far-reaching changes. In the first place, there was the unprecedented broadening of intellectual horizons that resulted from the invention of printing (Laurens Janszoon Coster and Johann Gutenberg) and the application of an old Chinese invention, the compass. Society was being revolutionized by the rise of the urban middle classes; maritime trade expanded; the early-capitalist commercial economy was coming into its own, most notably in northern Italy, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London. Finally, one can think of the great changes in the area of culture: the scientific revolution initiated by 'classical' natural science (Copernicus and Galileo), the renewal of art and learning engendered by the Renaissance and humanism (Leonardo da Vinci and Erasmus), and, last but not least, the religious and ecclesiastical changes brought about by the Reformation (Luther and Calvin).

#### ***1. Renaissance and Reformation***

An analysis of the forces that ushered in the modern period must do justice to their spiritual depth. The changes involved reached to the bedrock of the consciousness of the people of that age. Renaissance and Reformation in particular were not just

forces of renewal touching specific sectors of human existence, the arts or the church respectively. Rather, they both represented an all-encompassing movement of renewal, a breakdown and reconstruction of all things medieval. At stake in each of them was a new experience of reality, a new type of freedom, the genesis of a new human personality. Even in Renaissance circles this was discussed in terminology [124] that was fundamentally religious in character—'renaissance' meaning no less than a rebirth of humanity.

Next to noting their comprehensive intensity, I have to mention that the fields of interest of the Renaissance and the Reformation were vastly different. The Renaissance expressed its ideals primarily in the area of literature and art in styles that testified to individuality, vitality, classical beauty and mystical devotion; it gained acceptance mainly in the southern-European urban aristocracy (the Medici in Florence), well-to-do burghers (the banking house of the Fuggers at Augsburg) and Roman Prelates (Pope Julius II and Leo X). The Reformation, however, focused on the life and the doctrine of the institutional church, called for repentance and elicited response mainly among the common people in northern Europe.

While the religious forces of renewal took effect in largely distinct fields of activity and in different social and national groups and while these forces were very dissimilar, Renaissance and Reformation had at least one point in common or, to put it in other words, had the same negative effect: both contributed to the breakdown of the religious worldview of the Middle Ages and its ecclesiastically guided monoculture. The growth of technical skills, economic opportunities, political power, scientific knowledge and creative art, together with the felt need for new ways of involvement in church life, appealed to the sense of human dignity, national pride, individual freedom, and personal responsibility. Hence these forces of renewal shook to its foundations the complex hierarchical structure of medieval Christian society, in which the German emperor was, in theory at least, considered to be the highest authority in the natural domain of the state and the pope in Rome claimed the highest office in the supernatural realm of the church.

## ***2. In league against supernaturalism***

I introduce the distinction between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' purposely. In the Middle Ages 'supernaturalism' became increasingly the key to the theological arrangement of the entire field of learning such that it determined the relation between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, and, hence, between Christian faith and ancient non-Christian thought. Supernaturalism was likewise decisive for the prevalent view of the relation between church and state. Since Thomas, the state was known as the perfect natural society and the church as the perfect society on supernatural terrain. These two social structures were, [125] like faith and reason, supposed to be attuned to each other; however, in the final analysis the state turned out to be subject to the church under the leadership of Rome. In other words, the Christian distinction and synthesis of a natural and a supernatural realm had not only theoretical and cultural significance (in the relation of theology to philosophy and of Christian belief to the treasures of the Greco-Roman cultural heritage); it had sociological significance as well: it marked the hierarchical order of society as divinely ordained. In short, supernaturalism rendered legitimate the view of an ecclesiastically guided monoculture.

Hence the alterations that now took place in society inevitably also touched this spiritual core: the groundmotive of supernaturalism. In the course of the latter Middle Ages the mutual attunement of nature and the supernatural began to be questioned (William of Ockham, c. 1285-1349/50). Gradually, a distaste developed for the distinction between a higher spiritual and a lower profane world. In a word, the two-realm theory was losing credibility. Everywhere the quest was underway for a more integral experience of reality that would render superfluous the laborious attempts to find a synthesis between faith and reason, church and state, the supernatural being of God and the natural being of humans, and so on. In Renaissance philosophy and in the Western rationalism stemming from it, the idea of a supernatural reality quickly became dead capital, if it was not cast aside altogether.

To be sure, faith and religion continued to be respected in matters of private interest; in the eighteenth century rationalism and pietism flourished side by side and until the nineteenth century Western philosophy developed no radical critique of

religion. Nevertheless, the supernatural character of divine reality was a topic of philosophical discussion from the outset. The idea of God had changed. Now God was viewed as the ground and guarantee of human reason (Descartes, 1596-1650) or as the creative force of nature itself (Spinoza, 1632-77; *natura naturans*). As early as the Italian Renaissance God and man were put on the same, natural level; however infinite the macrocosmic world-soul, God, might be, the human person as microcosmos with infinite potential was mystically akin to him (Nicolaus Cusanus, 1401-64; Giordano Bruno, c. 1548-1600).

An anti-supernaturalistic standpoint also arose in the broad circle of the Reformation. I should, however, qualify this statement. While Renaissance and Reformation were equally committed to profoundly religious renewal, the two movements developed in essentially opposite directions. The habit, introduced by Hegel and current since Dilthey, of representing Renaissance and Reformation as parallel movements—the one a renewal [126] in worldly, the other in spiritual affairs, yet inspired by the one, broadly Christian–humanist tradition—is open to serious doubt. To be sure, many a humanist meant to remain loyal to the Christian church, especially in the earlier phases of the Renaissance; in the course of time, however, the spiritual incompatibility of the two movements became increasingly evident. Qua spirit and starting point Renaissance and Reformation were antagonists. Was Greco-Roman antiquity not the main source of inspiration for the artists of the Renaissance, while the Reformers drew from the fountain of holy Writ.

### ***3. The Reformation's own way***

The Renaissance adoration of nature and of natural life found expression in the ideal of the *uomo universale*, the self-sufficient, creative, cultured person, the image of an apotheosized, creating, self-deploying universe. An accomplished artist like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) would be an example. This picture would soon be given a one-sided, radical concentration in the rationalistic ideal of the *cogito*, i.e., of the human person as self-sufficient, creative and reconstructive reason (Descartes).

In the Reformation an entirely different persuasion prevailed. In the monastery at Wittenberg, Martin Luther (1483-1546) had struggled his way through the

depths of anxieties of sin and guilt, and in faith he had moored himself to the mercy of God. This God of grace became so central in his life and thought that no room at all remained for Renaissance naturalism; I mean, for revering uncorrupted, self-sufficient, autocratic human nature. *Sola gratia* meant that life was regarded as lived before God, *coram Deo*, entirely dependent on God's sovereign grace. In this relationship to God alone a person will come to full fruition and integration.

In the consciousness of the Reformers there was therefore no room for Renaissance naturalism. But scholastic supernaturalism was likewise devalued in greater or lesser measure. This should not be surprising when it is considered that, notwithstanding the difference sketched above, a historical line can be drawn between Renaissance thought and medieval thought. The seeds of the Renaissance ideal of self-sufficiency and its implied rationalism were sown in the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas, for example, had defended the position that even after the fall, nature remained intact (*naturalia manent integra*). This integrity implies a certain self-sufficiency of human reason. For when Thomas taught that the natural light of reason participates in the divine light of Truth, he placed reason in a relation of dependence upon God for its operation, its supernatural fulfillment and perfection, but simultaneously affirmed the dynamism of reason. Even though he regarded the human rational capacities as weakened and restricted by sin, reason's dynamism remains in principle untouched. To the degree that in later medieval thinking the distinction between nature and the supernatural became more conspicuous (ch. 5.12), the self-sufficient character of reason became more and more pronounced. It is this qualified self-sufficiency, this relative autonomy which, since the time of Thomas, gained the upper hand in medieval thought and which helped prepare the way for a broader, unqualified ideal of human autonomy, universality and integrity. Meanwhile, the Reformers set out on a new path. At least in principle! In practice they found it extremely difficult to divest themselves of the prevalent supernaturalistic pattern of thought.

In short, insofar as the deepest sources of their inspiration are concerned, Renaissance and Reformation went separate ways. The one movement seized upon the creative spark of the poetic imagination or relied on the guidance provided by the light of natural (sometimes even deified) reason; the other movement built on faith (*sola fide*) and sought to walk by the light of the biblical Word-revelation (*sola*

*scriptura*).

Leaving aside the process of development from Renaissance thinking to seventeenth-century rationalism and eighteenth-century Enlightenment, I turn to the Reformation and pose the question: How, on the reformational view, can justice be done to non-Christian thought? Is it possible, from the standpoint of *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, to speak of non-Christian thought in anything but negative and entirely antithetical terms? Did Luther not call reason a harlot and claim that faith slays reason (ch. 4.5)?<sup>1</sup> In the 'Age of Reformation' this problem seems to me to come to expression most pungently in the thought of John Calvin. I restrict my analysis to his views.

In interpreting Calvin's views one is faced with a vexing problem, which compels me to comment, however briefly, on the selective approach I have chosen. Calvin's engagement with the spiritual and intellectual issues of his time was profound and incisive; moreover, he was well acquainted with ancient culture and medieval thought. But he was not a philosopher in the professional sense of the word, and even as a theologian he did not write for academic purposes. Consequently, he never offers a rigorously systematic treatise that would deal directly with our topic: the relationship between Christian faith and current philosophical culture. Calvin was a reformer first, a teacher of the *ecclesia*. His activities were not primarily [128] scholarly but practical and pastoral. His aim was to interpret Scripture and to formulate and defend church doctrine anew, in terms of such exegesis. The issues of scholarship and culture are certainly commented upon, though usually in passing or by way of brief incidental excursions, and always with reference to building the faith of the community of Christ-believers.

Secondly, Calvin lived and worked in the sixteenth century. While prepared to fulminate against the vacuity of the ancient philosophies and to vent dire warnings against the futility of the scholastic penchant for distinctions, he nevertheless displays many a trace of their influence. In his commentaries on the Bible, for instance, and in his exposition of the Christian teachings he rejects late-scholastic supernaturalism; yet in support of other arguments he suddenly reverts to the natural-supernatural dichotomy. In other words, it almost looks as if adherents

---

<sup>1</sup> See Luther's *Lectures on Galatians*, 3:6.

and opponents can appeal to Calvin with equal justification!

What, then, is the hermeneutic key that would unlock for us Calvin's world of thought? Given that in various places in Calvin's works one finds dissimilarities and inconsistencies, I proceed on the assumption that the 'real' Calvin is not met with in reiterations he made for convenience of views current among his contemporaries, but rather in the new and non-conformist insights by which he on crucial points turned against the prevalent notions of the day. This makes my analysis a selective one, picturing Calvin as striking out on a new path. It would be impossible to paint the whole of Calvin in just a brief essay anyway. In sum: I analyze selectively and in the framework of the present volume there are good reasons for doing so.

#### ***4. Calvin and 'philosophia christiana'***

I would emphasize that 'reformation' always was more than a strictly ecclesiastical or theological program, especially for Calvin. Given the Reformation's point of departure, *sola scriptura*, Calvin championed submission to the word of God, not only in the life of the church but also in political, moral and social relations. This fact helps one to understand the social upheavals Calvinism produced in Strasbourg, Geneva, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and elsewhere. To Calvin, Reformation was a world-transforming force. It is in this light also that one must understand his desire to have the Reformation permeate even the world of scholarship. Calvin proclaimed the necessity of a uniquely Christian view of life: a *philosophia christiana* which would make a change for the better even [129] in the sciences. Remarkably, however, Calvin was able at the same time to give unstinted praise to those pagan writers in whose works shines an 'admirable light of truth' (II, 2, 15).<sup>2</sup> How was he able to reconcile these matters?

Calvin's first use of the expression 'philosophia christiana' most likely occurs in the well-known rectorial address of Nicolas Cop, *Beati pauperes spiritu* (blessed are the poor in spirit), which was delivered at the university of Paris in 1533. This address propagated views typical of the Reformation. One may surmise that Calvin

---

<sup>2</sup> The references in the text between parentheses are to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford L. Battles.

had a hand in writing it since he had to flee Paris as a result of it.<sup>3</sup> In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his main work, Calvin also refers to '*la Philosophie Chrestienne*.'<sup>4</sup> Still, one must not read too much into such references, as if they always entailed an argument for Christian philosophy in a twentieth-century sense of the word. In the two places here alluded to he meant the teachings of Christ or, more broadly speaking, the content of Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

The situation is different in the third book of the *Institutes*; here Calvin criticizes all philosophy known to him, calling it the philosophy of reason, and asserting the need for 'the Christian philosophy' in its stead:<sup>6</sup>

O, how much has that man profited who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God....

Let this therefore be the first step, that a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord. I call 'service' not only what lies in obedience to God's Word but what turns the mind of man, empty of its own carnal sense, wholly to the bidding of God's Spirit. While it is the first entrance to life, all philosophers were ignorant of this transformation, which Paul calls 'renewal of the mind' (Eph. 4:23). For [130] they set up reason alone as the ruling principle in man, and think that it alone should be listened to; to it alone, in short, they entrust the conduct of life. But the Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit.... (III, 7, 1)

First, then, Christian philosophy must be obedient philosophy. It ought not proclaim itself the fountain of wisdom, but must follow God's command and know itself to depend upon his will; for reason as such lacks the capacity to guide truly. Calvin repudiates the philosophy of his time at this point because and to the extent that it ascribes self-sufficiency to reason, in the sense that reason would be

<sup>3</sup> Calvin seems to have had access to both the introductory pieces written by Erasmus for his 1516 edition of the New Testament. One was entitled 'Paraclesis, id est exhortatio ad Christianae Philosophiae studium' (Summons, that is, exhortation to the study of Christian Philosophy). The sense in which these words were meant is clear from the other one: 'Ratio seu methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram Theologiam' (Reason or method; compendium for arriving at true Theology), in which Erasmus ventures to speak of the teaching of Christ as 'that pure and genuine philosophy of Christ.' Cf. Frederick J. M. Potgieter, *Die verhouding tussen die teologie en die filosofie bij Calvijn*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Foreword to the French edition of 1541. In earlier editions of his *Institutes* and in his *Commentary* on Psalm 49:2 Calvin speaks of the 'heavenly philosophy.' In the *Institutes* he also speaks of 'the secret and hidden philosophy' (III, 20, 1), meaning apparently the hidden knowledge of God's Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, when Calvin uses the expression 'our philosophy' (II, 2, 11), he means the content of Christian faith. Cf. Potgieter, *Die verhouding tussen die teologie en filosofie bij Calvijn*, 195-99.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of a 'Christian philosophy' in the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, in Erasmus, and also in Calvin, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 6-7, note 8.

‘the ruling principle in man.’<sup>7</sup> From this passage it is clear that Calvin realized that with his concept of obedient philosophy he was calling for a new course in the history of philosophy.

Calvin goes on to explain more closely what he means by this concept of obedience to the Lord. Christian philosophy must acknowledge that God has expressed his will in the biblical revelation and that philosophical reflection on humanity and reality in general must therefore be guided by the Word of God. In short, obedient philosophy must be taken to mean Scriptural philosophy.

Philosophy must also evince God’s Spirit; in other words, beyond being biblical it should be renewed or converted, the philosophy of those who have undergone that thoroughgoing conversion of the heart which leaves untouched no human act, including the act of thought.

Note that Calvin, founder of a university at Geneva, does not disparage or ignore rational thought irrationally. He asserts only that the mind, touched by sin, is ‘given over to blindness’ (II, 1, 9). Calvin likes to refer to Ephesians 4:23, ‘And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;’ and to Romans 12:2, ‘be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (II, 1, 9). Christian philosophy is something more profound than mere biblicism, more than external adjustment or accommodation of philosophical assertions to the biblical message (the shortcoming of so much of medieval Scholasticism!); *philosophia christiana* is living spirituality and inner renewal by the Spirit of God. Calvin held that no philosopher had achieved this.

It seems to me that this idea of a ‘self-insufficient’ philosophy attuned to God’s Word and moved by God’s Spirit is summarized elsewhere in the Institutes, namely, where Calvin expresses agreement with the Church Father Chrysostom’s contention that the foundation of Christian philosophy is humility. For Calvin *humilitas* covers everything that should characterize [131] reason: dependence, openness, receptivity; that is, union with God’s will, God’s Word, and God’s Spirit.

A saying of Chrysostom’s has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: ‘When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule of eloquence, he replied, “Delivery;” what was the second rule, “Delivery;” what was the third rule, “Delivery;” so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian

---

<sup>7</sup> The Latin text says *moderatricem*. In his Commentary on Romans 12:2, Calvin speaks in a similar connection of *hegemonikon*, the leading power.

religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, "Humility."<sup>8</sup> (II, 2, 11)

Clearly, Calvin is speaking here about humility 'before God' or, further, as 'unfeigned submission of our heart' (III, 12, 6). Calvin sets humility over against human pride and self-conceit: humility relinquishes all presumption and vainglory; it is far more radical than ordinary human humbleness, which can often go hand in hand with self-conceit.

Calvin, then, was convinced that a Christian philosophy was needed and he defended the idea that its starting point should be humility in the sense described above. In addition, given this idea of the humility of reason, Calvin took issue with the ruling philosophy of his times, which, as I said above, chose its starting point ever more confidently in the idea of the self-sufficiency or—as Kant would later put it—the 'autonomy' of reason.

### **5. Total depravity**

It seems to me that the deepest motive behind this evidently antithetical stance was the reformational idea of *curruptio totalis*, the total depravity of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Through original sin, Calvin teaches, human nature has been corrupted throughout: 'All parts of the soul were possessed by sin after Adam deserted the fountain of righteousness' (II, 1, 9). The human mind is no exception. This is why restoration is not enough; total renewal is required. The human spirit needs the Spirit of God. All trust in the merit of one's own mind is accordingly misplaced (II, 1, 2, 3); to assert 'self-power' (Greek: *autexousios*) is to Calvin a shameless philosophers' presumption (II, 2, 4).

Such criticism was the result of an immense spiritual struggle in the course of which Calvin largely freed himself from the tradition of his age, the prevalent medieval scholastic dualism of nature and supernatural grace. According to this tradition (to summarize it again briefly) humankind lost the supernatural life of grace through the fall into sin. [132] The natural capacities, the ability to reason in particular, damaged and wounded, cut off from supernatural perfection, nevertheless remained competent on the natural level.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 45-47.

The Reformers, Calvin especially, proceeded to take issue with this scholastic point of view.<sup>9</sup> Calvin rediscovered in the Bible the totalitarian character of sin and the pernicious power and dynamics of evil. The Bible taught him that sin is much more than a human shortcoming or acquired damage: evil issues from the human heart and reveals itself in rebellion against God in the whole of life. It manifests itself in unholy living, religious infatuation, moral corruption, and injustice terrible enough to destroy an entire society. Hence the doctrine of total depravity. To Calvin it is unthinkable that the human mind should have escaped such pervasive ruin. Against the Scholastics he asserts, referring explicitly to the human mind, 'that the part in which the excellence and nobility of the soul especially shine has not only been wounded, but so corrupted that it needs to be healed and to put on a new nature as well' (II, 1, 9).

The *corruptio totalis* doctrine has invited misunderstanding ever since. Calvin has often been taken to mean that all human behavior is equally sinful and pernicious. But the doctrine of sin as a total corruption of human nature does not mean that all sin is equally bad. The Bible speaks of lesser and greater sins and even of mortal sins. Calvin himself does not hesitate, in conformity with everyday language, 'to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature,' while at the same time emphasizing 'the universal condition of human depravity,' by which he means to say that, notwithstanding the degrees of heinousness of sin, there is no area of life which escapes the grip of sin and which, as a result, is not in need of the restoring grace through Jesus Christ.

Even less, therefore, is the doctrine of total depravity a specimen of Calvinistic 'sin pessimism,' as it has sometimes been called. The Reformers believed that the pervasive power of sin was broken by Christ and that, having arisen to new life himself, he drew people with him from the grave [133] of sin, through conversion

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. I, 516. Certainly the scholastic terminology of nature and grace, or nature and the supernatural, occurs in Calvin. In such instances it sometimes represents a questionable accommodation to the language of the scholastic anthropology current in Calvin's day. See Barend J. van der Walt, *Heartbeat*, 229-52. At other times, however, Calvin has something else in mind: not the scholastic distinction between nature and grace but the reformational opposition between sin and grace; that is, the distinction between the creation (nature fallen into sin) and the re-creation (realized and to be realized through God's grace in Christ); or, to put it differently, the distinction between the natural life that issues from birth to earthly parents, and the new, spiritual life that flows from being born to God, from being born again. Everything turns on the *use* of the words. The distinction between nature and the supernatural is in any case not consciously applied by Calvin to the force of sin on the one hand and the universal purport of Christ's saving work on the other.

and faith, to give them new life in grace. That is 'faith optimism' rather than 'sin pessimism.' The power of *sola gratia* overcomes the force of *corruptio totalis*.

Furthermore, the doctrine of total depravity may not be taken ontologically, as if sin had altered the essential being of humans so that Christ's salvation would have to be construed as a metaphysical operation. The renewal of human nature is, as Calvin sees it, not an alteration of being but a change of direction. In turning again to God, people receive a renewed existence. They receive, strictly speaking, not a new but a renewed nature.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of total depravity may be regarded as the counterpart of the reformational *sola gratia*, understood as exclusive dependence on God's grace. Grace may not be taken ontologically either; it is a direction and a relation. As the Reformer sees it, grace is not, as the Schoolmen claimed, a *donum superadditum*, a supernatural addition made by God to human nature, something lost in the fall and supposedly poured in again with baptism (*gratia infusa*). The Pauline epistles describe grace as the 'favorable disposition' and guilt-forgiving love through which God turns again in Christ to those who repent to reconcile and renew their natural, that is, creational existence.

### ***6. Sparks of light***

Calvin repudiates the scholastic notion, prevalent in the thirteenth century and thereafter, that the human mind retained a certain degree of self-sufficiency together with its capacity to discern truth even after the fall. It should be noted, though, that in so doing he 'goes for the jugular' of main-stream modern thought as well.<sup>11</sup> By and large, modern thought is characterized even more radically than medieval Scholasticism by the idea of the self-sufficiency of reason. Since the Renaissance this self-sufficiency is no longer restricted in some way or in need of completion by supernatural reality and truth. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment (Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804) and, since then, almost all of Western philosophy stressed the modern

---

<sup>10</sup> In II, 1, 9, Calvin actually writes, with juridical exactness, that the mind 'needs ... to put on all but a new nature as well' ('novam prope naturam induere opus habeat'). This distinction is lost in the Battles translation, which merely states: 'needs ... to put on a new nature as well.'

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John P. Le Coq, who from this modern standpoint of the self-sufficiency of reason answers with an emphatic negative the question 'Was Calvin a philosopher?' in *The Calvin Forum* 14, 155-58. See also, however, the critical reactions of Carl E. H. Henry, 'Was Calvin a philosopher? A reply,' 158-60, and Hendrik G. Stoker, 'Was Calvin a philosopher? A symposium,' 212-14.

autonomy idea and adopted it as its axiomatic [134] starting point. Even today, when many lament the consequences of this pretended autonomy and others regard the rationalistic and technocratic aspirations of the Enlightenment with reservations—I am thinking of certain existentialists and neo-Marxists—there is still great reluctance, if not downright inability, to find the way back to the roots of modern times and to question anew the hidden assumptions of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment means: humanity has come of age by virtue of the light of reason. Calvin, however, sees the human person as self-insufficient, and he calls the natural light of reason 'blind' (I, pref., 13). In doing so, he makes matters anything but easy for himself. For in this way a twofold task is formulated: not only to develop a philosophy of humility and dependence in the reformational sense but also to deal in a new way with the problem of non-Christian thought. Here we find ourselves confronted again by the problem outlined above. How can Calvin still show any appreciation at all for non-Christian thought, which rejects the light of God's truth? Should he not simply have taken his stand on the antithesis and rejected every synthesis, that is, every attempt to harmonize Christian belief and philosophy?

It bears repeating that Calvin does reject such synthesis. For example, he complains of the patristic writers that 'many of them have come far too close to the philosophers,' and he expresses indignation that some of them have even done their utmost—in vain, to be sure—'to harmonize the doctrine of Scripture halfway with the beliefs of the philosophers' (II, 2, 4). The Fathers did so, he thinks, only because they were insufficiently perceptive of the fact that human reason was not merely wounded by sin but entirely corrupted and blinded by it, so that it is in utter need of the guidance of God's Spirit. Thus Calvin rejects a scholastic accommodation.

Remarkably, Calvin does not confine himself to this rejection. He goes on to assert that 'in man's perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam,' especially in human reason (II, 12, 12; cf. I, 5, 14 and II, 2, 19). He points out that the human mind, though fallen, 'is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts' (II, 2, 15). He considers it contrary to Scripture and common sense to condemn human understanding to perpetual blindness (II, 2,

12).<sup>12</sup> Where the Kingdom of God is concerned, the greatest human minds are doubtless ‘blinder than moles’ (II, 2, 18), but in various earthly matters such as art, science and law, the power of human perception is able to achieve something nonetheless (II, 2, 14). [135]

Calvin does not acknowledge this grudgingly, as if it were a concession. On the contrary, he holds that a Christian should be the first to recognize the excellence of the classical pagan scholars and scientists, be it with the following qualification: supposing one encounters such excellence, one should value it not as an accomplishment or gift of human nature but as a gift of the Spirit of God (II, 3, 4). It is exactly this reservation that leads Calvin to warn us to be careful with our criticism. Should we presume to criticize the Spirit of God? Thus Calvin says:

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit himself. What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observations and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. (II, 2, 15)

### **7. General grace**

The necessity of honoring the biblical doctrine of human depravity without underrating God’s good gifts to those outside the orbit of faith sometimes leads Calvin to speak of ‘God’s general grace’ (*generalis Dei gratia*, II, 2, 17). This grace is ‘general’ insofar as the Lord God has left human nature in general in possession of many good things, although not of the true or highest good. It is general also in that it is the Lord’s means of curbing the power of sin in all people, so that none is able to pursue evil lusts unchecked.

I note that Calvin nowhere attempts to provide a systematic account of God’s active efforts on behalf of an apostate humanity in terms of ‘general grace’ (or

---

<sup>12</sup> I do not follow the Battles translation of ‘perpetua coecitatis ita cum damnare’ by ‘to condemn it [i.e., the human understanding] for its perpetual blindness.’

'common grace' as it came to be called later by such neo-Calvinists as Abraham Kuyper),<sup>13</sup> nor does he maintain a rigorous distinction between it and 'particular or saving grace.' Calvin is equally prepared to use terms like God's 'kindness' (II, 2, 17; I, 5, 14), his 'mercy' and 'gentleness' (III, 3, 25), his 'peculiar' or 'special grace' to all (II, 2, 14) [136] or to some (II, 2, 17);<sup>14</sup> or simply God's 'providence' whereby he blesses humanity or individuals with gifts and restrains the effects of sin (II, 3, 3).

Calvin's use of the phrase 'general grace' did not initially lead to its inclusion as a specific point of Christian doctrine. It does not appear in the great confessional writings of the Reformed tradition: the most one can say is that it is at times presupposed in them.<sup>15</sup> It came to be accepted in later Calvinist theology, however, where it was defended in various forms and with subtle distinctions. There is something disturbing about this development, for a distinction between God's common grace (the kindness he displays towards the entire world) and God's particular grace (to believers) all too easily provided an opening for the appearance of a dualism disconcertingly similar to that of the scholastic nature–grace scheme.<sup>16</sup> In this light, the opposition that has arisen to the doctrine of common grace in the twentieth century is quite understandable. The most noteworthy instances involved Herman Hoeksema, whose opposition to common grace resulted in the founding of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America in 1924; and Klaas Schilder, whose name came to be associated after 1944 with the *Vrijgemaakte Gereformeerde Kerken* in the Netherlands.<sup>17</sup>

Collection of certain of Calvin's ideas under the heading 'common grace' has not always benefited a proper understanding of his view. In fact, it proved detrimental; when we examine Calvin's view of God's purpose in restraining sin and bestowing the gifts of grace, we find that he suggests a number of rather *disparate* motives. God

<sup>13</sup> See Abraham Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*.

<sup>14</sup> In the last section Calvin asserts that one person excels above another on account of God's special grace so that it can be seen that God's grace is in bondage to no one. In other words, God bestows his gifts on everyone, but not in the same way or in the same measure (II, 3, 4). Cf. Josef Bohatec, *Das Naturrecht und die innerweltlichen Ordnungen nach Calvin*, 4, 8.

<sup>15</sup> See the *Belgic Confession*, articles 13, 14, 36; *Canons of Dordt* II, 5, 6; III and IV, 4, 8, 9; *Westminster Confession* V, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Here I would mention the following theologians: Johannes à Marck (1686); Wilhelmus à Brakel (1700); Bernard de Moor (1780); Jonathan Edwards (c. 1750); Charles Hodge and Archibald Alexander Hodge (nineteenth century); Herman Bavinck (*De algemene genade*, 1894); Abraham Kuyper (*De gemeene gratie*, 1902-5). See further the appendix in Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on common grace* (1928).

<sup>17</sup> The resistance (as it may be called) alluded to here is traceable to the Kalamazoo Synod of 1924, where the Protestant Reformed Churches, led by Hoeksema, separated from the Christian Reformed Church.

is concerned to maintain his creation (II, 2, 16) and to look after humankind and human society (II, 3, 4; III, 14, 3). He is also concerned to preserve his church in this world (I, 17, 7 and 11). But also: God intends through his blessings to bring unbelievers to penitence and contrition (III, 3, 25; I, 5, 14). God means to show his goodness anew every day, even to those who reject it (III, 24, [137] 2; III, 20, 15). God's mercies may even be meant to sear the conscience of the ungodly, imprinting their ingratitude, rebellion and guilt, so that they are without excuse (I, 3, 1; III, 3, 25; I, 5, 14; III, 25, 9).<sup>18</sup> In his dealings with the world, Calvin emphasizes, God reveals himself not only as the merciful Father but also as the sovereign Judge.

It is clear that in connection with the earthly existence of mankind and relative to the life of the nations, Calvin *sometimes* speaks of a general grace, that is, of a grace in which people participate in a general way. Still, whenever Calvin speaks of general grace he refers to God's merciful disposition towards fallen humanity. He certainly does not mean to demarcate a realm of being in the scholastic fashion: the realm of nature over against the supernatural realm of (particular) grace. Even when presenting a genuine appreciation of the non-Christian world, Calvin has no recourse to ontological categories (two realms of being); he continues to think in relational, religious categories (two relationships between God and humankind). Calvin juxtaposes not nature and grace (as realms of being), but sin (as a broken relationship) and grace (as a restored relationship). With his gifts and, for that matter, with his chastisement God does not override the powers and possibilities of nature; rather, he is engaged in breaking through the power of sin, with the all-conquering power of his gracious acts in order to restore nature, that is, the whole of created reality. On account of the fall, Calvin can find no security at all in the supposed potential of human nature as such. His trust is in the gracious faithfulness of God on which Christians and unbelievers alike depend for life and all its possibilities.

Calvin emphasizes therefore that it is God who is dealing with all persons, not only in their physical existence (Acts 14:17) but also in their admirable cultural achievements and the insights of science and philosophy which they have brought

---

<sup>18</sup> Calvin frequently cites Romans 1:20: God reveals himself in his works of creation so that fallen man may be deprived of every excuse. On the purpose of 'common grace' in Calvin, see further Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, 206-12; for a writer with a great feeling for nuance, see also Jochem Douma, *Algemene genade*, 234-57. On the connection between Calvin's view of 'common grace' and the theme of natural law, see Jacob Klapwijk, 'Calvijn over de filosofie.'

about:

But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? Let us be ashamed of such ingratitude, into which not even the pagan poets fell, for they confessed that the gods had invented philosophy, laws, and all useful arts. Those men whom Scripture (I Cor. 2:14) calls 'natural men' were indeed sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example [138] how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good. (II, 2, 15)

### *8. The insidiousness of sin*

If this be so, how perilous it is to criticize non-Christian thought! Calvin's criticism is never an automatic procedure of unraveling good and bad ideas in order to attribute the one to human sinfulness and the other to the benevolence of God. Calvin would penetrate behind the various thoughts of the thinker to the person who thinks, who wrestles with the truth and fails to find God, who perceives something of the truth but who uses it to set out again in ways of his or her own choosing. For Calvin the question is not whether fallen human nature is still furnished with God's gifts, including the gift of insight and understanding. The question is rather: How do these gifts of God function in the unbeliever's life? Is it to the honor and glory of God? Or is it to enhance one's possessions, power and esteem? If the latter is the case they can never serve as proofs of a natural goodness (II, 3, 4).

Romans 1 guides Calvin's reflections on this point. He emphasizes that, according to the apostle Paul, unbelievers certainly do possess knowledge, including even knowledge of God. Yet this perception in no way leads Calvin to advocate a natural (philosophical) theology. Calvin understands that the knowledge of God mentioned in Romans 1 is not an allusion to a residual truth-discerning capacity but that, on the contrary, it attests to God's wrath and is operative in the context of human self-deception, blindness, and guilt: 'when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were they thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened' (Romans 1:21). In strictly logical terms Paul's linking knowledge of God and misapprehension of God together may seem contradictory, but to Calvin (in Paul's footsteps), this passage speaks rather of the unfathomable depths of guilt: a person knows, and *simultaneously* desires

not to know the true God.<sup>19</sup>

In Calvinism, the idea of total depravity sometimes led directly to the conclusion of total human inability, and then to utter passivity as the approved attitude of religious piety. In the *Nadere Reformatie* (Further Reformation or Dutch Puritanism), the notion came to prevail that a human person is just a submissive, resigned being. Think of the 'five precious nots' of Wilhelmus Schortinghuis (1700-50): 'I will not, can not, [139] know not, have not, and am not worthy.'<sup>20</sup> Calvin has warned against such misconception, arguing that it would lead to inertia and ... self-exoneration. If human corruption is a built-in rational-moral incapacity, then the excuse cannot be far behind that 'I am, after all, blind, bad, and in bondage.' Calvin protested this kind of thing vigorously; in fact, he did not hesitate to counter such reasoning by proclaiming the insight, excellence, even the 'freedom' of every human being (II, 2, 7). That the Bible refers to humans as 'in bondage' and 'servants of sin' (John 8:33-34) might seem contradictory to this, but for Calvin it is profoundly true. To Calvin's perception, bondage to sin is actually confirmed by what a person does on his or her own free initiative with the gifts and possibilities which God bestows.

### ***9. Beyond antithesis and synthesis, humility***

Calvin's position on philosophy features radical criticism in concert with sincere admiration. I have tried to show why. To summarize in my own words, I would say that in Calvin's view non-Christian philosophy is neither a house in which a Christian can live and breathe nor a house that needs to be razed to the ground. Yet, it is even less a combination of the two, that is, a structure some parts of which need to be torn down and other sections of which need restoration only, as if truth and falsehood consist of so many separable propositions which can be added and removed as circumstance requires.

Every philosophy, one could say, is a personal philosophy and therefore a philosophy *coram Deo*, pursued before the face of God. Every ideological construction is authored by a living person who has his or her own experience with

---

<sup>19</sup> See Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 145 ff, especially 151-54. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>20</sup> Wilhelmus Schortinghuis, *Het innige Christendom* (1740); 1858 edition, 349.

God and the world and who tells the story of it in philosophy. It is a story in which the truth is not absent but—to use the language of the Bible—held in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18), a story in which the light shines in darkness and is not comprehended (John 1:5). Calvin puts it this way: ‘God’s burning lamps ... strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth, these are smothered’ (I, 5, 14). Certainly the light of reason shines, but it is ‘choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively’ (II, 2, 12).

It seems to me that it is this tension between light and darkness, insight and incomprehension, truth and lies, present in one and the same system, which makes Calvin so cautious in his evaluation of non-Christian [140] thought. He does not accept it gratuitously, as if the depths of sin should somehow have left philosophy untouched, at least in its noblest representatives. Nor does he condemn it, as if one had the right to write off people and cultural developments God himself has not abandoned. Still less, however, does one find in Calvin a rudimentary synthesis (a ‘half-harmonization,’ see II, 2, 4) between Scripture and philosophy along the lines of ‘As a Christian I feel myself claimed equally by the Bible and by the extra-biblical message of this or that philosopher.’ As if a Christian could live by the sum of (Christian and unchristian) component truths. As if he could abide in some chambers of another’s dwelling-place.

What, then, is the alternative? The foundation of our philosophy is humility, says Calvin. *I believe this humility may also be considered determinative for Calvin’s attitude towards non-Christian thought.* Non-Christian thought lacks the foundation of humility, of openness to God. It has the tendency to base itself on the idea of the self-sufficiency of human reason. This is why Calvin subjects it to sharp criticism. But in doing so he shows this self-sufficiency to be self-conceited, a disguised insufficiency. Self-sufficient thought, closed as it is to the truth of God, receives that truth anyway; yes, it derives its life and dynamism from its wrestling with and against that truth. God’s truth is the precondition—one could even say: the transcendental presupposition—of the very possibility of Christian and non-Christian philosophy alike! Humility, Calvin’s motive, becomes operative once again. The Christian must open his mind to God’s truth wherever it manifests itself—even in the vague and repressed notions of that truth in the works of non-Christian philosophers. And what can this mean other than an appeal to listen, open-mindedly and critically?

It is as if Calvin would challenge us, twentieth-century folk, to listen attentively to the ideological paganism of our age. We must listen until we are able to hear—behind the experiences of the wrestling personality—the voice of God, who makes an appeal to the one so engaged and in and through him or her speaks to us. Perhaps in this way a *philosophia christiana* can still learn a great deal from modern thought, without surrendering to it.

### ***10. For further reading***

The study of Calvin’s position must at least include a reading of his *Institutes*, book I, chapters 1-5, dealing with the knowledge of God which has been by nature implanted in humans and book II, chapters 2 and 3, dealing with the corruption of human nature and the blindness of reason [141] as well as with God’s general grace. See also my paper ‘Calvin and NeoCalvinism on Non-Christian Philosophy’ and the contributions by Charles Partee, ‘Calvin, Calvinism and Rationality;’ Dewey Hoitenga, ‘Faith and Reason in Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God;’ and Jacob Klapwijk, ‘Rationality in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition.’ Herman Kuiper has given an extensive analysis in his book *Calvin on Common Grace* on the many places and the different ways in which God’s general grace is treated in Calvin.

### *Works of John Calvin*

- Opera quae supersunt omnia*. 59 vols. Ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz & E. Reuss. In: *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29-87. Ed. C.G. Bretschneider. Brunswick/Berlin: C.A. Schwelschke et Filium, 1863-1900.
- Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Trans. and ed. J. Owen. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947.
- Commentaries on the Book of Psalms*. 5 vols. Trans. J. Anderson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949.
- Commentary on Seneca's 'De Clementia.'* Trans. Ford L. Battles & André M. Hugo. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969.
- Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Trans. Ford L. Battles. In: *Library of Christian Classics*, vols. 20 and 21. Ed. John T. McNeil. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.

### *Literature cited*

- Bavinck, Herman. *De algemene genade*. Kampen: Zalsman, 1894.
- Berkouwer, Gerrit C. *General Revelation*. Trans. Lewis B. Smedes. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955.
- Bohatec, Josef. *Das Naturrecht and die innerweltlichen Ordnungen nach Calvin*. n.p.: Publicaties van de Reünisten-Organisatie van Nil Desperandum Deo Duce, no. 8, 1936.
- Boisset, Jean. *Sagesse et sainteté dans la pensée de Jean Calvin: Essay sur l'humanisme du réformateur français*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.
- Dooyeweerd, Herman. *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. 4 vols. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij H. J. Paris; Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1953-58.
- Douma, Jochem. *Algemene genade. Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuyper, K. Schilder and Joh. Calvijn over 'algemene genade'*. Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1966.
- Henry, Carl F.H. 'Was Calvin a Philosopher? A Reply.' *The Calvin Forum* 14(8) (March, 1949): 158-60.
- Hoitenga, Dewey. 'Faith and Reason in Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God.' In: Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven & Nicholas Wolterstorff eds., *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*. Lanham: UPA, 1983, 17-39. [142]
- Hugo, André M. *Calvijn en Seneca. Een inleidende studie van Calvijns Commentaar op Seneca's De Clementia, anno 1532*. Groningen: Wolters, 1957.
- Klapwijk, Jacob. 'Calvijn over de filosofie.' *Correspondentie-Bladen van de Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte*, 36 (March, 1972):13-20.
- Klapwijk, Jacob. 'Calvin and Neo-Calvinism on Non-Christian Philosophy.' In: Kornelis A. Bril, Hendrik Hart & Jacob Klapwijk eds., *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy; Essays in Honour of D.H.Th. Vollenhoven*. Toronto: Wedge, 1973.

- Klapwijk, Jacob. 'Rationality in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition.' In: Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven & Nicholas Wolterstorff eds., *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*. Lanham: UPA, 1983, 93-112.
- Kuiper, Herman. *Calvin on Common Grace*. Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1928.
- Kuyper, Abraham. *De gemeene gratie*. 3 vols. Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1902-05.
- Le Coq, John P. 'Was Calvin a Philosopher?' *The Personalist* 29 (1948): 252-60; and *The Calvin Forum* 14(8) (March, 1949): 155-58.
- Luther, Martin. *Lectures on Galatians*. In: Works, vol. 26. Ed. J. Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia, 1963.
- Parker, Thomas H. L. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969.
- Partee, Charles. 'Calvin, Calvinism and Rationality.' In: Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven & Nicholas Wolterstorff eds., *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*. Lanham: UPA, 1983, 1-16.
- Potgieter, Frederick J. M. *Die verhouding tussen die teologie en die filosofie bij Calvijn*. Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1939.
- Schortinghuis, Wilhelmus. *Het innige christendom tot overtuiging van onbegenadigde, bestieringe en opwekkinge van begenadigde zielen, in deszelfs allerinnigste en wezenlijkste deelen gestaltelijk en bevindelijk voorgesteld in zamenspraken*. 1740. Rpt. ed.: Nijkerk: I.J. Malga, 1858.
- Stoker, Hendrik G. 'Was Calvin a Philosopher? A Symposium.' *The Calvin Forum* 14(10) (March, 1949): 212-14.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1948.
- Van der Walt, Barend J. *Heartbeat. Taking the Pulse of Our Theological-Philosophical Heritage*. Potchefstroom: Pro Rege, 1978.