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The Mirror of God's Goodness: Man in the Theology of Calvin

B. A. Gerrish

"Where there is no zeal to glorify God, the chief part of uprightness is absent."¹ Whatever the strange figure of the Hidden God may have meant for Luther's faith, it is plain that his faith grasped the Revealed God as "pure love" (*eitel liebe*). In his *Large Catechism* he writes: "It is God alone, I have often enough repeated, from whom we receive all that is good . . . He is an eternal fountain which overflows with sheer goodness and pours forth all that is good in name and in fact."² Calvin's understanding of man and his place in the world might almost be said to provide a theological commentary on this matchless confession of Luther's faith.

In the opening paragraphs of his 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin announces that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man, the basic themes of theological wisdom, mutually condition each other. If, then, God is for him, as for Luther, *fons bonorum* (the Fountain of Good), we should expect the being of man to be somehow defined as the correlate of this regulative concept of God. It may be that the systematic coherence of Calvin's anthropology tends to get buried under the sheer mass of dogmatic material; and it has to be remembered that nothing less than the whole of the *Institutes* is required to set out his doctrine of man, just as the work *as a whole* presents his doctrine of God. Nevertheless, it is fair enough to hold that two segments of the *Institutes* are of decisive importance for our theme. There is, we are told, a twofold knowledge of man. God has made Himself known to us as Creator and Redeemer; correspondingly, we are to know what man was like when first created and what his condition is since the fall. Human nature as created is the particular theme of book 1, chapter 15; Calvin turns to human nature as fallen in book 2, chapters 1-5. That these two segments may not be taken to exhaust his doctrine of man is evident; he subsumes the fall and sin under the knowledge of God the Redeemer, and further discussion of man remains particularly for the sections on christology and the life of the Christian man. Indeed, there is plainly a sense in which, for Calvin, the restoration of man in Christ has dogmatic precedence even over the doctrine of the original estate, since, so he argues, we know of

Adam's original blessedness only by viewing it in Christ, the Second Adam.

If, however, with these reservations, we confine our attention to the two designated segments, we do in fact have enough to uncover the distinctive pattern in Calvin's anthropology. Admittedly, he has a lot of other important things to say even in these two segments, but I think we can fairly sum up the heart of the matter like this: The existence of man in the design of God is defined by thankfulness, the correlate of God's goodness; the existence of man in sin is defined by pride or self-love, the antithesis of God's goodness. To have said this much is, of course, already to recognize that in his understanding of man Calvin was working with ideas inherited from the Apostle Paul by way of Augustine.

As with Calvin's doctrine of God, one has to call at the outset for setting aside of hoary misconceptions. It is not true that Calvin's was an authoritarian religion, in the sense that man's most fitting posture is one of cringing before the divine despot. (This is what students of psychology may think they have learned from Eric Fromm; but in truth it has more to do with Calvin's notion of idolatry than with his notion of piety.) Nor did Calvin hold that fallen man is in no sense capable of achieving anything beyond his own self-degradation. Here, it must be admitted, Calvin's rhetoric sometimes obscures rather than reinforces a theological point. If his description of man as a "five-foot worm" was suggested to him by one of the Psalms (Psalm 22:6), it is hard not to judge that he was carried away by his own rhetoric when he pronounced man unfit to be ranked with "worms, lice, fleas, and vermin."³ But *how* does one judge that such language really is, in fact, the obfuscation of a strictly theological point? Only by taking due note of the sober theological distinctions made elsewhere — these enable us to see in the heavy rhetoric Calvin's horror that man in sin has surrendered his very humanity to a life of thanklessness.

I. The Design of God

Calvin has already introduced man at the end of his chapter on creation. Having fashioned the universe as a magnificent theater of His glory, God placed man in it last of all as the privileged spectator. Even in himself, adorned by God with exceptional gifts, man was the most excellent example of God's works. And he was endowed besides with the capacity to turn his eyes outwards and admire the handiwork of God in others of His creatures.

How great ingratitude would it be now to doubt whether this most gracious Father has us in his care, who we see was concerned for us even before we were born! How impious would it be to tremble for fear that his kindness might at any time fail us in our need, when we see that it was shown, with the greatest abundance of every good thing, when we were yet unborn!⁴

There, already, is the heart of Calvin's anthropology. But he turns to man in detail only in chapter 15 of the first book.

It is in this chapter (secs. 3-4) that Calvin writes of the *image of God* in man. He introduces the subject in a strangely off-handed way, apparently to clinch his argument for the immortality of the soul. But the notion of the divine image has far greater systematic importance than its modest entrance suggests. The way in which Calvin interprets it opens up, better than anything else, the heart of his understanding of man and his place in the world. Further, it constitutes an important link with other parts of the system. It is closely bound up, for instance, with Calvin's teaching on *redemption*, since Jesus Christ, as the Second Adam, is the one in whom the divine image is restored: being "saved" means being renewed after the image of God in Christ. In addition, Calvin builds his *social ethics* partly on the endurance of the divine image even in fallen man.⁵ The sacredness and dignity of human life are guaranteed by the fact that man was made in the image and likeness of God, and that the remnants of the image persist. It is not only Genesis 1:26 that serves Calvin in this connection, but also Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in His own image." This meant, for him, that the image was not lost but remained regulative of man's social relationships. (The christological reference of the divine image he found especially in 2 Corinthians 4:4, which speaks of the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.")

Perhaps Calvin's doctrine of the image of God in man did receive a somewhat external interest from the well-known debate between Barth and Brunner. At least, it is largely to that debate that we owe the careful attention the scholars have paid to this theme in Calvin's theology.⁶ But it does not follow that the theme was marginal to his own thought. He made extensive use of it, perhaps more than the Scriptures warrant. At any rate, he pulled together under this rubric somewhat diverse biblical topics, linked accidentally by a single word, and gave them a distinctive interpretation. Whether or not the interpretation was strictly original, we do not, for now, need to inquire.

What does he mean, then, by the “image of God”? His treatment of the term in the *Institutes* is highly characteristic of him. He liked formal definitions. But, being trained in the rhetoric of the Renaissance, he thought it gauche to offer his definition first: it was more elegant to lead up to it. At the risk of appearing gauche, we shall begin with it. Calvin writes:

The integrity with which Adam was endowed is expressed by this word [*imago*], when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker.⁷

It is apparent that what Calvin seeks in his definition is comprehensiveness. The image is anything and everything that sets man apart from the rest of God’s creation; or again, by argument back from the restoration of the image in Christ, it is anything and everything that we receive by redemption. In detail, he seeks to divide the general concept by adopting common psychological categories, according to which, as he goes on to put it in a summary formula, Adam had light of *mind* and uprightness of *heart* (with “soundness of all the parts”). That is to say, Adam’s intellect saw with clarity, and the affections were duly subordinated to it.

Surveying the opinions of others (another of his favorite procedures), Calvin appropriates whatever he can, but does not hesitate to tell us where his predecessors went wrong. The distinction of Irenaeus between the “image” and the “likeness” of God he rejects: Irenaeus did not understand the nature of Hebrew parallelism. Even Augustine went astray by suggesting that the image refers to the psychological “trinity” of man’s intellect, will, and memory, which he held to be an image (or analogy) of the Blessed Trinity. This, Calvin decides, is mere speculation. On the other hand, he apparently thinks Chrysostom had a point when he identified the image with man’s dominion over nature. At least, this is part of it. But it is not the sole mark by which man resembles God, and the image is to be sought more correctly *within* man as an inner good of the soul. Finally, Calvin does not want to reject out of hand even the exegesis of Osiander, although he was a man “perversely ingenious in futile invention.” Osiander thought the image pertained to the body as well as to the soul, in that Adam’s body pointed forward to the incarnation of the Son of God. This, Calvin assures us, is unsound. But he has already admitted that the upright posture of the human body is at least an outward token of the divine image; for, as Ovid says in the

Metamorphoses, while other living beings are bent over earthwards,

Man looks aloft and with erected eyes
Beholds his own hereditary skies.⁸

Perhaps, however, the desire to be comprehensive and to take the opinions of others into account may obscure the distinctive feature of Calvin's interpretation. And one has to look to his commentaries (as well as to other sections of the *Institutes*) to shed further light on his definition.⁹ The first point to notice is the exact metaphor Calvin had in mind when he spoke of an "image." He meant the image seen in a mirror — a reflection. This was a metaphor he particularly liked, and he had used it already in earlier chapters of the *Institutes*; the whole of creation had been represented as a mirror in which the glory of God is to be viewed. We are, Calvin says, to "contemplate in all creatures, as in mirrors, those immense riches of his wisdom, justice, goodness, and power."¹⁰ Similarly, in the chapter on man's nature as created (book 1, chap. 15) Calvin states that "even in the several parts of the world some traces of God's glory shine." If, then, the doctrine of the image of God in man is intended as a "tacit antithesis," to set man apart from the rest of creation, the question must be asked: How, or in what sense, is man peculiarly and particularly a mirror of deity? In what special manner is he the "reflection of God's glory"?

The answer is most clearly read in the last phrase of Calvin's definition: ". . . and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker." While the entire created order reflects God's glory as in a mirror and in this sense "images" God, man is set apart from the mute creation by his ability to reflect God's glory in a conscious response of thankfulness. It is this, above all, that sets him apart from the brute beasts; they likewise owe their existence to God, and so reflect His glory, but they do not know it. Man is endowed with a soul by which he can consciously acknowledge God as the Fountain of Good. The soul is not itself the image, but rather the mirror in which the image is reflected. Properly, then, we can speak of man as bearing the image of God *only* when he attributes his excellence to the Maker. Man is the apex of creation in the sense that the entire creation has its *raison d'être* in the praise that man alone, of all God's earthly creatures, can return to Him.¹¹

To sum up: In Calvin's view, the image of God in man denotes not an endowment only but also a relationship. That is to say, he does not seek to define the image solely by what man possesses as

his “nature,” but also by the manner in which he orients himself to God. Man is not made in the image of God simply because he has reason, for instance, whereas the rest of God’s creatures do not. Even an individual endowed with a wealth of special “gifts” is not in the image of God, in the fully human sense, unless he *acknowledges* them as the gifts of God. The relationship of man to God is thus made constitutive of his humanity; and, as we were led to expect, there is a correlation between the notion that is constitutive of deity and the notion constitutive of humanity. God as Fountain of Good has His counterpart in man as His *thankful* creature. And the disruption of this relationship is, for Calvin, nothing less than de-humanizing.

The distinction implicit here becomes crucial for understanding Calvin’s view of sin and the fall. The scholars have found an ambiguity in Calvin’s answer to the question: Is the image of God lost in fallen man? But if the image includes both man’s rational nature and its proper use toward God, the answer is bound to be two-sided. Insofar as the image culminates in the thought of a “right spiritual attitude,”¹² one can hardly speak of it as other than “lost” in fallen man, who (by definition) is man fallen out of the right spiritual relationship to God. Redemption, accordingly, is nothing less than restoration of the image. Later, in discussing the effects of the fall, Calvin will assert that faith and love for God, since they are restored to us by Christ, must be accounted lost by the fall — taken away. But the rational nature of man, by which he is *enabled* (in distinction from mere beasts) to love God, is not simply wiped out.¹³ In short, the image of God in man embraces both a gift and its right use, both man’s rational nature and its orientation to God in thankfulness. For, “We are no different from brutish beasts if we do not understand that the world was made by God. Why are men endowed with reason and intellect except for the purpose of recognizing their Creator?”¹⁴

II. The State of Sin

With these remarks, the transition is already made from man in the design of God to man in the state of sin. Once again, the important point is to grasp the systematic coherence of Calvin’s thoughts. Quite simply, if Adam’s *original* state was one in which he acknowledged his endowments as the gifts of God, his *fallen* state was induced by the pride that claimed something for himself. Not content to be *like* God, he wanted to be God’s *equal*; and in seeking his own glory, he lost the capacity to reflect the glory of God. If one can hold firmly to this cardinal thought, then much of the nonsense that is commonly retailed concerning “total

depravity” can be quickly disposed of. Calvin had no interest in belittling the moral and intellectual achievements of man. He was too well schooled in the classics and in Renaissance scholarship to do that. But he had also gone to school with his master Augustine, and what he did wish to show was that all the works of man, even the very best, remain radically defective when the doer no longer receives his life as a gift. And precisely because he knew classical and Renaissance man so well, he could argue his case with penetrating insight.

Now there are several intricate questions in Calvin's discussion of sin that we must risk leaving out. In particular, he wrestled with two problems bequeathed to him by his mentor, Augustine: the *cause* of Adam's sin and the *mode of its transmission* to the rest of us. These are admittedly important questions, and Calvin's reflections on them are both intriguing and important. But it is obvious that one could not, in any case, resolve the problems of sin's cause and transmission without determining what sin is. This, then, is the first matter on which one must comment. And the only other matter which this study will take up (because of its pertinence to our central theme) is the extent of the damage wreaked by sin on human nature.

We are not surprised to find that Calvin has a definition of original sin (*Institutes*, 2.1.8). But what is the *nature* of the “depravity” and “corruption” to which the definition refers? His analysis of the concept of sin is, in fact, more clearly given in his interpretation of Genesis 3; it is the “history” of Adam's fall that shows us what sin is (*Institutes*, 2.1.4). As usual, Calvin proceeds by telling us what others have said on the subject, especially Augustine.

We read that Adam ate a tempting fruit, “good for food . . . a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). Was his sin, then, that he indulged his appetite? Calvin answers: “To regard Adam's sin as gluttonous intemperance (a common notion) is childish.” The forbidden fruit was a test of obedience, an exercise of faith. In a paradise abounding with delights, abstinence from only one fruit would hardly have made him virtuous. Rather, “the sole purpose of the precept was to keep him content with his lot.” So, Calvin moves on to Augustine's interpretation, which states that pride was the beginning of all evils: “For if ambition had not raised man higher than was meet and right, he could have remained in his original state.” Is Augustine right, according to Calvin? The English translation says that Augustine “speaks rightly.” But what Calvin wrote was “non male.” And he seems to have meant it

literally: Augustine's answer is not bad, but it is not quite right either.¹⁵

Calvin wants, in fact, to get behind human pride to the root cause of it. And what is that? He has several words for it; perhaps "unfaithfulness" is the regulative one. But it is crucial to note that, for him, the essence of infidelity is *not listening to God*. That is the way he read the biblical narrative. The serpent's opening gambit, it will be recalled, is to ask the question, "Did God say . . .?" (v. 1). A little later, somewhat emboldened, he assures Eve: "You will not die" (v. 4). The serpent works by instilling contempt for the Word of God. Here is the theme Calvin wants to pick up, in order to show the root of pride and so to improve on Augustine. Adam, in short, was *verbo incredulus*; he questioned the Word. And this destroyed his reverence for God, whom he pictured as not only deceitful but envious and hostile to His own creature.

Finally, at the end, Calvin seems to return to the theme of carnal desire, and says: "As a result, men, having cast off the fear of God, threw themselves wherever lust carried them." Bondage to carnal desire, in other words, is not the beginning of sin, but its final consequence. The heart of the matter, as Calvin saw it, is summed up like this:

Unfaithfulness, then, was the root of the Fall. But thereafter ambition and pride, together with ungratefulness, arose, because Adam by seeking more than was granted him shamefully spurned God's great bounty, which had been lavished upon him. To have been made in the likeness of God seemed a small matter to a son of earth unless he also attained equality with God — a monstrous wickedness!

It will be noticed, in this passage, how Calvin can equally well make his point with the word "ungratefulness"; or, from the perspective of God, he can state that "Adam, carried away by the devil's blasphemies, as far as he was able extinguished the whole glory of God." Plainly, here is the same complex of ideas — with some shifts in terminology — that we have found already in Calvin's thoughts on the image of God in man. But now everything is, so to say, inverted; for whereas man was created to image God's glory in an act of thankful acknowledgment, he has fallen into thankless pride that spurns God's bounty.

Calvin rounds off his anatomy of sin with a remark that points forward to redemption: "The door of salvation is opened to us when we receive the gospel today with our ears, even as death was then admitted by those same windows when they were opened to Satan." (As so often, he is quoting Bernard of Clairvaux.) But his

immediate agenda requires him to address himself, next, to original sin and the ravages of sin in the intellect and the will of man. Here we find some of Calvin's gloomiest rhetoric; but it can hardly account for the common opinion that there is a sharp difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism on the extent of sin's damage to the soul. Although he is sharply critical of the Schoolmen at many points, Calvin thinks one cannot improve on their distinction between the natural and the supernatural gifts of God: "The natural gifts in man were corrupted, but the supernatural taken away."¹⁶ The problem is that the Schoolmen did not agree on a satisfactory *explanation* of the formula. And in this respect the earlier Schoolmen are judged better than the "more recent Sophists."¹⁷ Hence a great part of the discussion requires Calvin, as usual, to sort out the sheep from the goats among his predecessors and to arrive at satisfactory definitions of terms. The sole point which this study must stress, however, is that Calvin seems explicitly to caution us against "adjudging man's nature wholly corrupted."¹⁸ At any rate, what he was concerned to establish was, not that man is utterly bad, but that the taint of sin vitiates even his best and leaves no corner of his life unblemished. And Calvin tried to demonstrate this thesis, in turn, with respect to both man's intellectual and his moral achievements.

Hence, writing of the human *intellect*, Calvin certainly will not allow that it can attain to a sound knowledge of God; for it cannot reach the assurance of God's benevolence (a point that Luther, too, liked to stress).¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is entirely consistent with Calvin's standpoint that he maintained a firmly positive attitude toward the attainments of human culture, since failure to do so would be denial of his fundamental notion of God as *fons bonorum*:

The mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. 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 of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in light esteem, we contemn and reproach the Spirit himself.²⁰

Calvin then parades the cultural achievements of man in law, natural philosophy, logic, medicine, mathematics. And, as a good humanist, he concludes:

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. 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.²¹

Similarly, when Calvin turns to his discussion of the fallen *will*, he insists that even in sin man cannot be wholly bad; otherwise, we could not say that one man is “better” than another:²²

In every age there have been persons who, guided by nature, have striven toward virtue throughout life. I have nothing to say against them even if many lapses can be noted in their moral conduct . . . Either we must make Camillus equal to Catiline, or we shall have in Camillus an example proving that nature, if carefully cultivated, is not utterly devoid of goodness.

Then, of course, comes the refrain: this “natural goodness,” too, must be traced to the special bounty of God. “The endowments resplendent in Camillus were gifts of God.” But now the question is this: Did the ancient heroes, such as the patriot Camillus, acknowledge gifts as gifts?

Calvin’s answer is that “heroes” are driven by their own ambition. In other words, we may say, the glory they seek is their own. Hence Calvin grants that their virtues will have their praise in the political assembly and in common renown among men, but not that they make for righteousness before the heavenly judgment-seat. For, “Where there is no zeal to glorify God, the chief part of uprightness is absent.” While, therefore, in ordinary, day-to-day usage (“common parlance,” as Calvin says) we do not hesitate to distinguish one man as “noble” and another as “depraved” in nature, we are still to include both under the theological verdict of human depravity. Plainly, Calvin is making the point that Luther conveyed by his distinction between “Christian” and “civil” righteousness. To say (theologically) that a man is “depraved” is not to say that, morally considered, he is a bad man. All turns on the motivation out of which a man acts — whether or not, that is, his deeds are done in thankfulness to the Fountain of Good. The doctrine of sin is not strictly about a person’s moral condition, but about his relationship to God; it pronounces a religious, not an ethical verdict. Pagan virtues, properly understood, are in truth tokens of grace; but insofar as they are the virtues of a man who claims them for himself, they differ from the virtues of the justified man because they issue from a quite different orientation of the total self.

While it cannot be claimed that Calvin's language is always perspicuously self-consistent, a consistent thread does run through his thoughts on human nature as created, fallen, and redeemed. Man's being points beyond himself to the source of his existence and of the existence of all that is. He was fashioned as the point of creation at which the overflowing goodness of the Creator was to be reflected back again in thankful piety. This is the condition from which he fell, no longer heeding the voice of God. And it is the condition to which, in hearing the Word of God in Jesus Christ, he is restored.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin edition by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols., "Library of Christian Classics," vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.3.4 (1:294). The 1559 *Institutes* (hereafter *Inst.*) is cited by book, chapter, and section; the numbers in parentheses give the volume and page in the translation.
2. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 368.
3. *Inst.*, 1.5.4 (1:56); *Sermon on Job*, 2,1 *seq.* I owe the second citation to Cairns (see n. 6 below), p. 139.
4. *Inst.*, 1.14.22 (1:182).
5. See, e.g., *Inst.*, 3.7.6 (1:696-97).
6. See esp. David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1953); Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949).
7. *Inst.*, 1.15.3 (1:188).
8. I have borrowed the English version of Ovid's lines from the older translation of the *Institutes* by Henry Beveridge. It should be noted that here, as also in the mention of Irenaeus and Chrysostom, I am furnishing the name of Calvin's source.
9. Torrance (see n. 6 above) is the most useful guide on the theme of the *imago dei* in Calvin's sermons and commentaries.
10. *Inst.*, 1.14.21 (1:180).
11. See further B.A. Gerrish, ed., *Reformers in Profile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 153-54.
12. Niesel, *op. cit.*, p.67.
13. *Inst.*, 2.2.12 (1:270).
14. Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston, "Calvin's Commentaries," ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 158-59 (on Heb. 11:3).
15. All quotations in this and the following two paragraphs are from *Inst.*, 2.1.4 (1:244-46).
16. *Inst.*, 2.2.4 (1:260).
17. *Inst.*, 2.2.6 (1:263).
18. *Inst.*, 2.3.3 (1:292).

19. *Inst.*, 2.2.18 (1:277).
20. *Inst.*, 2.2.15 (1:273-74).
21. *Inst.*, 2.2.15 (1:274).
22. All quotations in this and the following paragraph are from *Inst.*, 2.3.3-4 (1:292-94).

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