

Calvin on Knowledge of God and of Ourselves

1. According to Calvin, "Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves. . . . On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. . . . But though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie, due arrangement requires that we treat of the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter. . . . By the knowledge of God, I understand that by which we not only conceive that there is some God, but also apprehend what it is for our interest, and conducive to his glory, what, in short, it is befitting to know concerning him. For, properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety. . . . By piety I mean that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires. . . . what avails it . . . to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? The effect of our knowledge rather ought to be, first, to teach us reverence and fear; and, secondly, to induce us, under its guidance and teaching, to ask every good thing from him, and, when it is received, ascribe it to him. For how can the idea of God enter your mind without instantly giving rise to the thought, that since you are his workmanship, you are bound, by the very law of creation, to submit to his authority?--that your life is due to him?--that whatever you do ought to have reference to him? . . . On the other hand, your idea of his nature is not clear unless you acknowledge him to be the origin and

fountain of all goodness. Hence would arise both confidence in him, and a desire of cleaving to him, did not the depravity of the human mind lead it away from the proper course of investigation" (Institutes, I, i, ii).

2. It seems quite clear from what Calvin says here that the concerns he expresses are closely parallel to, if not, indeed, only verbally different from, those I am concerned to express by my analysis of the existential question, or the question of faith, necessarily presupposed by religion generally and by the Christian religion in particular. So far from talking only about the material objects of true and solid wisdom, Calvin is really concerned with their formal object(s)--or, in other words, with the whole field of inquiry constituted by the existential question as to the ultimate meaning of our existence. To be sure, Calvin presupposes the specifically theistic formulation of this existential question, and hence of the field of inquiry constituted by it. To this extent, his formulations are more restricted than either Schleiermacher's or my own. But when he speaks of God and ourselves, he is evidently speaking of both existentially, not metaphysically. This becomes especially clear when the God who is known is said to be known not merely as existent but as the source of a radical gift and demand, to which the only appropriate response is confidence and loyalty. In other words, the knowledge of God and of ourselves of which Calvin speaks is knowledge of the meaning of God for us--of ultimate reality as implicitly authorizing our authentic self-understanding and of the authentic understanding of ourselves as authorized by ultimate reality. Thus to propose, as H. Richard Niebuhr does, for example, that the knowledge with which theology has to do includes "three parts: the knowledge of God, of companions, and of the self," however well-intentioned, is seriously misled and misleading (PCM, 113). The issue is not as to the

material objects of theological knowledge, with respect to which Niebuhr's proposal would be entirely in order; the issue, rather, is as to the formal objects of theological knowledge.