

Calvin and the Holy Spirit

Introduction

One of the greatest areas of confusion in Christian circles today concerns the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of both believers and the church. This confusion abounds particularly in connection with His gifts. Those who claim to be teachers – “understanding neither what they say nor whereof they affirm” – need to be taught themselves, especially by the One they so greatly abuse. Men and women uttering gibberish in His name, claiming to heal in His name, drinking poison in His name, handling snakes in His name, controlling church members in His name, strutting around as if they were apostles in His name, following their own private hunches in His name, and robbing Christ of His glory in His name, need to be rebuked, suspended from office, and excommunicated for their grievous abuse and blasphemy.

Given our professed obedience to the whole of Scripture, we in the Reformed tradition also need to learn afresh in a spirit of deep humility who He is and why He is bestowed on us.

In this quest we could have no surer guide than the Reformer John Calvin. His contribution to our knowledge – doctrinal, experiential and practical – is so excellent and important that B. B. Warfield styles him “the theologian of the Holy Spirit.” Calvin’s rich development of the Person and Work of the Spirit has influenced generations of Reformed believers, not least such ‘giants’ as John Owen, Thomas Goodwin and Jonathan Edwards.

In a magazine article we cannot hope to be comprehensive, so we shall deal as concisely as we can with Calvin’s teaching on the Spirit’s divine Personality; His relation to Holy Scripture; His bearing on Christ’s human nature; His role in the believer’s life; and His relation to the church’s means of grace, especially His distribution and control of gifts, both natural and spiritual.

The Spirit's Divine Personality

Calvin offers us sound Biblical instruction on the Divine Personality of the Holy Spirit. He informs us that he is delighted with Gregory of Nazianzus' reference to the three Persons of the Godhead: "I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendour of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straight way carried back to the one." (*Institutes* I. 13.17) Accordingly, he notes how the Word of God attributes divine names, qualities, works and worship to the Holy Spirit. (*Institutes* I. 13.14) He is therefore as truly God as the Father and the Son.

He 'subsists in God's essence' while being distinguished by an 'incommunicable quality,' namely, of proceeding from the Father and the Son. (*Institutes* I.13.6; *Commentaries on Hebrews* 1.3; *John* 14.26; 15.26; 16.7) Here Calvin carefully clarifies the full deity of the Spirit, His distinct personality, and His role in God's plan of salvation.

In this connection, Warfield notes, Calvin eschews all speculation on the subject, deriving his teaching exclusively from Holy Scripture. This is why the Gospels do not even try to explain the mysteries of the Trinity, but plunge straight into what we need to know of the Gospel of our salvation.

To Calvin, the Holy Spirit is no mere force or influence or emanation from God, but a real Person, possessing all the elements of personality. The Saviour's employment of the pronouns 'He,' 'Him' and 'Himself' in His closing discourses prove this. (*John* 14.16-17; 16.7-8)

Such passages give Calvin the opening to slam Islam, Popery, Anabaptism and Libertinism. By the words "ALL THAT I HAVE SAID," says Calvin, we learn that the Spirit "will not be a builder of new revelations." From them "we may refute all the inventions which Satan has brought into the Church from the beginning, under the pretence of the Spirit." When they claim that Holy

Scripture “does not contain a perfection of doctrine, but that something loftier has been revealed by the Spirit,” they prove that “the spirit that introduces any doctrine or invention apart from the Gospel is a deceiving spirit, and not the Spirit of Christ.” (*Commentary on John* 14.26)

The Spirit’s Relation to Holy Scripture

In handling the subject of the Holy Spirit’s relation to Holy Scripture, Calvin concentrates on His work of inspiration and authority.

a. Inspiration

Without a moment’s hesitation, Calvin insists that the entire Bible is God’s inspired Word: “Scripture is from God . . . it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.” (*Institutes* I.7.5) In every book without exception, shining through all the diverse styles of its human penmen, the “majesty of the Spirit” is “evident everywhere.” (*Institutes* I.8.2) In quoting Scripture, Calvin regularly uses the formula: “the Holy Spirit says.” As usual, Calvin’s teaching is eminently practical: the Spirit’s breathing its words into all its writers ensures that “our faith” is given “a sure and immovable foundation, namely, God’s truth.” (*Sermons on Ephesians* 1973.10)

b. Authority

Coming from the very mouth of God, Holy Scripture is in its own nature invested with divine authority. To seek such authority elsewhere is to mock the Holy Spirit, its Author. If we wish to find peace in our conscience, he says, or to be delivered from the instability of doubt and vacillation, we must come to rest “in the secret testimony of the Spirit,” which is “more excellent than all reason . . . The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.” (*Institutes* I.7.4) We do not need to prove that the Bible is the Word of God before we believe it; the Spirit Himself convinces us of its truth and humbles us under its authority.

In view of its divine inspiration and authority, Calvin presses certain duties on all: “It is incumbent on us diligently to read and attend to the Scripture, if we would receive any advantage or satisfaction from the Spirit of God.” (*Institutes* I.9.2) Since the Spirit is determined “to be connected with the Word by an indissoluble bond,” we may be sure that “He only displays and exerts His power where the Word is received with due reverence and honour.” (*Institutes* IV.8.13; I.9.3)

Then follows a sorely-needed lesson for us all: “God does not bestow the Spirit on His people in order to set aside the use of His Word, but rather to render it fruitful.” (*Harmony of the Gospels* III.375)

Finally, for our comfort, he assures us (echoing Augustine’s sentiment) that “what God demands from us by His Word, He likewise bestows by His Spirit.” We need never despair of being “strengthened in the grace He has given to us.” (*Pastoral Epistles* 208)

The Spirit’s Bearing on Christ’s Human Nature

From Calvin’s numerous references to the Holy Spirit in Christ’s human nature, we select only a few salient points. These are connected with His conception, His growth through childhood, His receiving the Spirit without measure, His baptism, His temptation in the wilderness, His preaching, His miracles, His bestowal of the Spirit on His disciples, His death, and His resurrection.

The mysterious union between the Spirit and Christ’s human nature took place specifically that believers in every age would certainly know their Saviour by the Spirit’s teaching: “when He, the Spirit of truth is come . . . He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.” (John 16.13-14)

We omit the testimony of His Spirit in the Old Testament prophets because it appertains to His pre-incarnate divine person, not to His human nature. (See 1 Peter 1.11)

a. Christ's conception

At his heaven-sent visit to Mary, the angel does not explain to her how the Spirit will conceive Christ's human nature in her womb, but, says Calvin, "he only leads the virgin to contemplate the power of the Holy Spirit, and to surrender herself silently and calmly to His guidance." Though His "operation . . . would be secret," it would produce no less than the "holy . . . Son of God." The Spirit's awesome work is to produce a Saviour "not . . . born by ordinary generation." (*Harmony of the Gospels. Commentary on Luke 1.35*)

b. His growth through childhood

Commenting on Christ's youthful growth in wisdom and grace, Calvin sees Christ receiving in His human nature, "according to His age and capacity, an increase of the free gifts of the Spirit, that 'out of His fulness' He may pour them out upon us; for we draw grace out of His grace." (*Harmony. Comm. On Luke 2.40*)

c. His receiving the Spirit without measure

"Christ was all at once," Calvin believes, "endued with the Spirit in the highest perfection." "The power of grace He possesses" is in no way "limited," as it is in believers (compare Ephesians 4.7). "The Father has poured out on Him an unlimited abundance of His Spirit." (*Commentary on John 3.34*)

d. His baptism

Calvin views Christ as needing "to be armed with a remarkable power of the Spirit," in order to "discharge the office of Redeemer . . . and to be equipped with the power to baptize them with the Holy Spirit. He was therefore Himself baptized with the Spirit." (*Harmony. Comm. on Matthew 3.11 and 16*)

e. His temptation in the wilderness

The Spirit led Christ into the wilderness for Him to "undergo an apprenticeship" before undertaking the arduous and exalted office of Redeemer. He "withdrew from the world of men" in order to "come forth by the guidance of the Spirit . . . as the Ambassador of

God . . . sent from heaven” and “surrounded by marks of divine grace and power.”

These marks were even more illustrious than those bestowed on Moses when he returned to the people following his awesome interview with God, “that the majesty of the Gospel might not be inferior to that of the Law.” (*Harmony. Comm. on Matthew 4.1*)

By His victory over Satan, that obstinate and persistent opponent of our salvation, Christ “obtained a triumph for us,” having been “tempted as the public representative of all believers.” Therefore, we may expect “the Spirit of God” who was with Him to preside over all our contests with Satan, and so strengthen our faith. (*Harmony 1.210*)

f. His preaching

Following His ordeal in the desert, Christ “returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee” to preach. (Luke 4.14) To prove His divine call and mission to His hometown of Nazareth, He deliberately quoted Isaiah 61.1f, because first, “He alone was endued with the fullness of the Spirit, to be the witness and ambassador of our reconciliation to God;” and secondly, “because He alone, by the power of the Spirit, performs and grants all the benefits that are here (in Isaiah 61) promised.”

Moreover, He proved that He did “not act by human authority, or in a private capacity,” but had been “sent by God to restore salvation to His Church. He does nothing by the suggestion or advice of men, but everything by the guidance of the Spirit of God.” This deliberate submission to the Spirit’s leading places “the faith of the godly” on the sure foundation of “the authority and power of God.” Christ’s very anointing by the Spirit proves that His ministry is heaven-sent. (*Harmony. Comm. on Luke 4.18*)

g. His miracles

As He disputed with His enemies, our Lord told them that He performed His miracles by “the finger of God.” This metaphor,

Calvin explains, He used precisely because it demonstrates that “God works and exerts His power by His Spirit.” (*Harmony. Comm. on Matthew* 12.28) Thus, all His miraculous power – over men, nature and devils – was exercised through His human nature by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

h. His bestowal of the Spirit on His disciples

The Lord Jesus promised His Spirit to His disciples both from Himself and from His Heavenly Father. Why? Asks Calvin. Because in His personal absence “He will not allow them to remain destitute of assistance, for He will be present with them by His Spirit.” Christ “committed them” and every believer “to the protection and guardianship of the Spirit.” Thus He is their Comforter. True, the Spirit’s method of comforting is different from Christ’s: He comforts them by showing them that He has appeased “the wrath of God by atoning for the sins of the world, to redeem men from death, to procure righteousness and life.” The Spirit comforts them by making them “partakers, not only of Christ Himself, but [also] of all His blessings.”

As the Spirit of truth, He inwardly instructs them. Worldly men cannot enjoy this peculiar excellence, for their “carnal views” regard the Holy Spirit “as a dream, because trusting to their own reason, they despise heavenly illumination.” The Holy Spirit’s teaching “is known only by the experience of faith.” Thus God “exalts the Church by a distinguished privilege, above the whole world.” (*Commentary on John* 14.17)

When He breathed on the disciples, Christ did so to qualify them “for discharging so difficult an office” as forsaking all to preach Him to all the world, govern the Church, and raise men to heaven, “a task far beyond human capacity.” He “prepares the apostles for it by the grace of His Spirit.”

Moreover, today, only the Spirit can qualify men to preach the Gospel, and discharge their ministry “faithfully and honestly.” Once they are installed into their charge, “the only Shepherd of

His Church” must “display the power of His Spirit in the ministers whose agency He employs.” Furthermore, “those whom Christ calls to the pastoral office He . . . adorns with the necessary gifts.” Possession of the Spirit and His gifts is therefore “ a sure criterion . . . for judging of the calling of those who govern the Church of God . . . they have *received the Holy Spirit.*” (*Commentary on John* 20.22)

i. His death

When he comes to Christ’s death, Calvin judges that we are not to esteem it “by the external act, but by the power of the Spirit. For Christ suffered as a man; but that death becomes saving to us through the efficacious power of the Spirit . . . And he (the writer) calls the Spirit *eternal* for this reason, that we may know that the reconciliation of which He is the worker or effector, is eternal.” (*Commentary on Hebrews* 9.14) That Calvin himself estimated Christ’s death aright is apparent from his encomium: “There is no tribunal so magnificent, no throne so stately, no show of triumph so distinguished, no chariot so elevated, as is the gibbet on which Christ has subdued death and the devil.” (*Phil-Col* 191)

In passing, Calvin points us to a special role the Spirit played in the Saviour’s agonizing death. Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross, he says, “eminently deserves our attention . . . from the circumstance that the Holy Spirit, in order to engrave it more deeply on the memory of men, has chosen to relate it in the Syriac (we would say Aramaic) language.” He makes us hear “Christ Himself” speaking, above the light jests of the by-passers, whose “detestable indifference” to His “deep sadness and fearful trembling” we might otherwise remember above all else. By quoting Christ’s very words, the Spirit would indelibly impress on us how He “maintained a struggle with the sorrows of death, as if an offended God had thrown Him into a whirlpool of afflictions.” (*Harmony. Comm. on Matthew* 27.46)

j. His resurrection

“Two things must be found in Christ,” Calvin stipulates, “in order that we may obtain salvation in Him, even divinity and humanity. His divinity possesses power, righteousness, life, which are conveyed to us through His humanity.” His humanity is declared in Scripture in terms of His descent from King David.

His divinity “was declared” by His openly exercising a real heavenly power following His resurrection; “that is, the power of the Spirit.” This power was exercised through His risen human nature. It becomes ours only “when a conviction of it is imprinted on our hearts by the same Spirit.” His distinct testimony is needed, because the power that shines forth from Him since His resurrection is “peculiar . . . to God,” and “incontestably” proves “Him to be God.” This is why, in connection with the resurrection, the Spirit is expressly called “the Spirit of holiness” – it is by the power of Christ’s resurrection that He “sanctifies” us, confirms and ratifies the proof of His resurrection to us. (*Commentary on Romans* 1.4) Since His resurrection, “Christ is” still “the source of all blessings to us.” But they are all “communicated to us” through His human nature “by the Spirit.” (*Corinthians* I.212) “The gift of the Spirit was a fruit of the resurrection of Christ.” (*Acts* I.100)

In sum, the Holy Spirit concentrated His divine energy on the Saviour, in wondrously forming His human nature, leading and sustaining Him as He went about doing good, till He came to offer Himself a sacrifice for the sins of many. Since His resurrection the Spirit continuously communicates every blessing we enjoy through Christ’s glorified human nature, especially revealing the things that belong to our peace.

The Spirit’s Role in the Believer’s Life

The Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in the believer’s life is so necessary, claims Calvin, that “till the Spirit has become our instructor, all that we know is folly and ignorance.” (*Eph* 212) Moreover, “everyone’s advancement in piety is the secret work of the Spirit.” (*Institutes* III.24.13) In every area that entails the

application of salvation, therefore, the Spirit's energetic presence is required.

As we proceed to investigate Calvin's teaching on 'the great change,' we shall find that he views the commencement of the believer's spiritual life as a multi-faceted work, involving many elements: regeneration or conversion, union with Christ, faith, repentance, illumination, sanctification and the Word. For convenience, we shall treat each of these separately, though they are inseparable in the Spirit's work.

a. Regeneration

"Man needs to be born again," claims Calvin, "because he is flesh." (*Institutes* II.3.1) That is, being "born of Adam," we are all "depraved creatures," and need to become "the new workmanship of Christ" and "formed by His Spirit into a new life." (*Gen* I.284) Whatever natural assets we possess, "we have nothing of the Spirit except by regeneration." (*Institutes* II.3.1) While the purpose to regenerate His elect lies in the will of the Father, and the grace or substance in the new birth is from the Son, its "efficacy" or invincible power lies "in the Spirit." (*Daniel* II.372; *Institutes* IV.15.6)

b. Conversion

In many places Calvin equates regeneration with conversion, for they are indistinguishable in point of time. In conversion, he says, God "changes our hearts and turns us to obedience by His Spirit," raising us from our spiritual death in sin and bringing us out of our graves. (*Zech-Mal* 216; *Isaiah* II.193)

In this instant work, "we do not turn through our own efforts," but God goes before us by His grace and calls us to Himself. "Freewill" would put "conversion in the power of man," but it is wholly "the Holy Spirit's work." (*Jer* III.229,233) God "acts within," holds and moves our hearts, creates new inclinations in us, and by them draws us to Himself. (*Tracts* III.147,148) "Conversion" is thus the "renewal of the mind and heart." (*Jer*

IV.102) Calvin's own conversion exemplified his teaching. "Obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery," he found himself "subdued and brought . . . to a teachable frame" of mind by God." (*Psa* I.40)

c. Union with Christ

In regeneration or conversion, the Spirit unites us to Christ, the source of all our spiritual life. "We are led from Adam to Christ," or "out of ourselves" into Christ. (*Eph* 2:25; *Rom* 7:2) "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ efficaciously unites us to Himself." (*Institutes* III.1.1)

d. Faith

Seen from our human viewpoint, regeneration immediately produces saving faith. This is "a warm embrace of Christ, by which He dwells in us, and we are filled with the Divine Spirit." (*Eph* 2:26) "Faith does not proceed from ourselves, but is the fruit of spiritual regeneration." (*John* 1:43) It is indeed our act, but it is implanted in the heart and activated by the Spirit within.

Should any Pelagian question this, Calvin rebuts him with the truth: "No man can obtain faith by his own acuteness, but only by the secret illumination of the Spirit." (*Harmony* II.39)

e. Repentance

Repentance "immediately follows faith," and "is produced by it." (*Institutes* III.3.1) Like faith, "repentance is a true and peculiar work of the Holy Spirit," for "no-one repents of his own accord." (*Isa* 1:80; II.25) In language precisely equivalent to that used of regeneration, Calvin depicts repentance as "an inward turning of man unto God," soon showing itself in good works. (*Acts* 1:218)

f. Illumination

In bringing God's Word to His people, the Spirit begins by removing their spiritual blindness. "Nothing is accomplished," he insists, "by preaching . . . if the Spirit, as our inner Teacher, does not show our minds the way." It is He who "by a wonderful and

singular power forms our ears to hear and our minds to understand.” The “way to the kingdom of God is open only to him whose mind has been made new by the illumination of the Holy Spirit . . . Because these mysteries are deeply hidden from human insight, they are disclosed solely by the revelation of the Spirit.” Where “the Spirit of God does not illumine” our minds, the Scriptures appear to men as sheer “folly.” (*Institutes* II.2.20)

g. Sanctification

From this initial enlightening, Calvin teaches, the Spirit goes on to complete His work of sanctifying the elect. With penetrating insight, Calvin informs us that “the Spirit will be found nowhere but in Christ.” This is why we need to be united to Christ, for only in this way we may become “partakers of the Holy Spirit.” (*Eph* 262) Union to Christ infallibly leads to sanctification by the Spirit.

“The increase, as well as the commencement, of everything good in us, comes from the Holy Spirit.” (*Eph* 261) “The Holy Spirit not only originates faith, but increases it by degrees, till He conducts us by it all the way to the heavenly kingdom.” (*Institutes* III.2.33) And so he assures us: “The Holy Spirit is a continually flowing fountain . . . that will never fail us.” (*John* I.151)

It is He who sprinkles our consciences with the blood of Christ, removing our sense of guilt, and securing our access into the presence of God. (*Psalms* II.295) It is He who “is the pledge of our adoption,” “ratifies the Gospel to us,” “acts the part of a judge within us,” confirms God’s promises to us, removing all fear that God may revoke them, and turns us progressively to God. (*Gen. Ep.* 203; *Institutes* III.2.36; *Genesis* I.241; *Eph.* 209; *Psa* III.235) In short, “we have not a particle of vigour in us but what we have received from the Holy Spirit.” (*Institutes* II.20.5)

Put another way, by the generosity of God, Christ is given to us “to be grasped and possessed by us in faith.” Once the Spirit has united us to Him, we receive “a double grace, namely, being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in

heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life." (*Institutes* III.11.1)

This is why the graces listed in Galatians 5.22 are called "the fruit of the Spirit." After enumerating the rotten fruit of our condemned nature, the apostle "now tells us that all virtues, all good and well-regulated affections, proceed from the Spirit, that is, from the grace of God and the renewed nature we have from Christ." (*Commentary on Galatians* 5.22)

Calvin finally exhorts us in his customary practical way: "If God's Spirit lives in us, let Him govern all our actions." And let those who boast of His indwelling prove their claim by living a Spirit-filled, holy life. (*Commentary on Galatians* 5.25)

h. The Word

In all these interior processes, the Spirit operates always through His own written Word. "The Holy Spirit so adheres to His own truth . . . that He only displays and exerts His power where the Word is received with due reverence and honour." (*Institutes* I.9.3) "When God shines into us by His Spirit, He at the same time causes that sacred truth which endures for ever to shine forth in the mirror of His Word." (*Psalms* V.29) Illumination, therefore, is by His Word. But so too are union with Christ, conversion (which embraces faith and repentance), and sanctification. Whenever, therefore, we preach the Gospel, we ought not to separate from it "the efficacy of the Spirit." (*Isaiah* IV.39) The Spirit joins Himself to His own Word because, without His efficacy, "the preaching of the Gospel would avail nothing." (*Isaiah* IV.271)

So then, "God works in His elect in two ways: within, through His Spirit; without, through His Word. By His Spirit, illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, He makes them a new creation. By His Word, He arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal." (*Institutes* II.5.5)

As a sharp reminder to those who would separate the two, Calvin adds: “As soon as the Spirit is separated from the Word of Christ, the door is open to all kinds of delusions and impostures.” (*John* II.145) What a rebuke this is to the ‘super-spiritual’ fanatics of our time!

The Spirit’s Relation to the Church’s Means of Grace, especially to Gifts

Because so many in the churches today have lost sight of God’s grace, they neglect the means of grace. In Calvin’s day, when the Lord was delivering much of Europe from Popery, preaching, the sacraments and prayer were highly prized by millions. These channels or conduits of grace fed newly reformed Protestant nations with the pure water of life proceeding from the throne of God, transforming them into God-fearing peoples.

a. Preaching

Both by example and in writing, Calvin encouraged the public expository preaching of Holy Scripture. In this connection, he developed the Biblical concept of ‘unction.’ By preaching *ex tempore* he wished consciously to depend on the Holy Spirit. In a letter to Lord Somerset, he expressed his desire that “the people be so taught as to be touched to the quick, and that they may *feel* that what the apostle says is true,” namely, that the Word of God is a sharp, two-edged sword. For this reason, “reading from a written discourse” should be abandoned in favour of “preaching of a lively kind.” (*Selected Works*. 1983. 5.190)

This powerful ministry of the Spirit was the most marked feature in Calvin’s own preaching and writing on the topic. When the minister is faithful to His Word, he assures us, speaking only what God puts into his mouth, the inward power of the Spirit is joined to his outward voice. In this way, Calvin acknowledged the sovereignty of the Spirit in blessing His own inspired Word. The Spirit, he reminds us, is not tied to our tongues, but is free to confer grace on whomever He pleases; yet it is through the feeble

ministry of men that He illumines minds, regenerates hearts, and renews lives. (*Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 3.6)

b. The Sacraments

God has appointed Baptism and the Supper as public ordinances in His Church to confirm and increase faith, Calvin teaches. Yet they “only fulfil their office when the Spirit, that inward Teacher, comes to them.” For “by His power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened.” If the Spirit is lacking, then partakers are like blind men gazing on the sun, or deaf men listening to a voice. But when He is present, our faith is really sustained, nourished and strengthened. (*Institutes* IV.14.9)

c. Prayer

Owing to our weakness, inflicted on us by sin, we will make no progress in prayer unless the Spirit joins Himself to our cries. In His kindness, “God gives us the Spirit as our Teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right” to pray for, and to “temper our emotions.” It is He, and not merely our own spirit, who prays or groans within us (Romans 8.26) because “our natural powers” are insufficient to either identify or take our needs to God. These groans are “unspeakable” because when believers “try to stammer, they are confused and hesitant.” Therefore, because He is willing to prompt us in prayer, we “should seek such aid from the Spirit.” As with all other of the Spirit’s operations within, we must not withhold our own efforts to pray, but cast ourselves on His aid to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. (*Institutes* III.20.5)

Gifts

The last area to consider is the gifts of the Spirit in the Church. Today, wrong thinking on the gifts of the Spirit is rife. No sooner is the word ‘gifts’ mentioned than many immediately think of His extra-ordinary gifts bestowed on the infant New Testament Church. Calvin’s teaching takes in the whole spectrum of gifts, both natural and spiritual. Consequently, it is far more Biblical and profitable than modern ‘charismatic’ enthusiasm.

a. Natural

Because of the Fall, our understanding and right use of even earthly gifts is radically defective. National and international government, family management, science, logic, mechanical skills and the liberal arts have all been affected. (*Institutes* II.2.13-15) For this reason, we should not forget, but remember with thanks, “those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit which He distributes to whomever He wills for the common good of mankind.” Citing Bezaliel and Aholiab as needing the skill of the Spirit “instilled in them” to build the tabernacle (Exodus 31.2-11; 35.30-35), Calvin concludes: “It is no wonder, then, that the knowledge of all that is most excellent in human life is said to be communicated to us through the Spirit of God.” (*Institutes* II.2.16)

Because the Spirit has produced their finest accomplishments, we should not despise pagan contributions, but rather use them and thank God for them, including poetry, physics, dialectics, mathematics, philosophy, and “all useful arts.” (*Institutes* II.2.15)

b. Spiritual

As for spiritual gifts, says Calvin: “Whatever gifts are offered us in Christ, we receive by the agency of the Spirit.” (*Catechism of the Church of Geneva. Tracts* II.50) These are bestowed for the good of the Church as a whole. But we must distinguish between those gifts that were extra-ordinary, given to the apostolic church, and those that continue till Christ comes again.

From Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 12, Calvin extracts “the gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles,” such as faith to perform miracles, tongue-speaking and interpretation, as having “vanished away.” Their specific purpose, he claims, citing Mark 16.20, Acts 14.3 and Hebrews 2.4, was to confirm the Gospel in the Roman Empire, (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 12.8-10)

Since these gifts are now withdrawn, we must concentrate on “the salvation proclaimed by the Gospel,” which alone will enable us to “believe with the heart unto righteousness, make a true confession

of Christ, pass from death to life, be made rich in Christ, and withstand both the world and its god Satan. (*Commentary on Acts* 10.46) Ordinary gifts, such as preaching, teaching, exhorting, ruling, caring for the sick, and distributing material aid, are given not to pander to pride, but to make us humble. (*Commentary on Romans* 12.6-8; *1 Corinthians* 12.28-31; *1 Thessalonians* 1.2) On these benefits, he adds winsomely: “If we would be enriched every now and then with new gifts of the Spirit, let us hold out to God the lap of faith.” (*Acts* I.220)

Conclusion

In view of this survey, we today have so much to learn from John Calvin. He brings divine order into human confusion, sanity in the midst of madness, and dependence on God the Holy Spirit for everything good. Let us therefore praise and thank the Lord for him and his precious ministry.

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