Calvin on Self Knowledge

Introduction
It was pagans who bequeathed to the world the notion of self-knowledge without God. The exhortation *Know Thyself* is inscribed on the pagan temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece, and it was the pagan philosopher Thales of Miletus who discovered that “the most difficult thing in life is to know thyself.”

For the Reformer John Calvin, however, self-knowledge springs from a source altogether out of man’s reach. The knowledge of ourselves is impossible apart from the knowledge of God. (*Institutes* I.1.1)

“Knowledge of ourselves,” he says, “lies, first, in considering what we were given at creation,” and, second, in calling to mind “our miserable condition after Adam’s fall.” Both of these are undiscoverable outside God’s written Word. But there we learn self-knowledge in a wholly practical way: from our original state we gratefully learn that “we are ever dependent” on God our Maker for everything; while reflection on our present sinful and wretched state “should truly humble us and overwhelm us with shame.” (*Institutes* II.1.1)

Calvin presents these two contrasting biblical portraits of man over against the flattering lies of ancient pagan philosophers (and contemporary renaissance humanists), both of whom paint human nature in the glowing colours of goodness and dignity, with the prospect of limitless improvement.

Our Original State
As God’s handiwork, we stood originally in the theatre of nature as “the noblest and most remarkable” of God’s earthly creatures. Being fashioned in the likeness of God Himself, we were endowed with pure integrity, consisting of high intelligence, well-controlled affections, orderly senses, and a will capable of perfect obedience.
In only one feature were we unlike our Maker: we were mutable. Yet every facet of our souls shone with some glints of our Maker’s image. (*Institutes* I.15.3)

Of these faculties, the understanding and will predominated. The former could distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, truth from error; the latter could select and follow what the understanding perceived as good. (*Institutes* I.7-8) Indeed, our will could rise “even to God and eternal bliss.” It was truly free. Had we used this freedom aright, we would have attained to eternal life. (*Institutes* I.15.8)

For the true knowledge of ourselves, then, we must ‘take a walk in Eden,’ and always remember that we were created before we fell.

**Our Present State**

But in Adam we chose to disobey God, and as a punishment, we forfeited our free will. Not only so, we now find ourselves with confused minds, uncontrolled affections, disorderly senses, and a body that is as enslaved to sin as our will. From the moment of his first disobedience, Adam’s descendants received an hereditary taint that pervades their entire nature. This inherent depravity renders us both guilty and inexcusable. We have brought about our own ruin and wretchedness. This is what is known as **original sin.** (*Institutes* II.2-5)

This, Calvin assures us, is “what God’s truth requires us to seek in examining ourselves,” namely, “the kind of knowledge that will strip us of all confidence in our own ability, deprive us of all occasion for boasting, and lead us to submission” to God’s verdict on us. (*Institutes* II.1.2) Until we find this “sorry spectacle of our foulness” staring us in the face, we shall never grasp the greatness of our loss, abhor ourselves as we should, or begin to seek God in order to “recover those good things we have utterly and completely lost.” (*Institutes* II.1.1)
However, a huge obstacle stands in our way: innate and blind self-love. This evil cannot bear to think of ourselves as hateful. It not only bars the way to self-knowledge, it even “delights in its own sweetness,” and so plunges us “into the worst ignorance.” (Institutes II.1.2)

To try and renounce our chief vices or reform our morals is no remedy, for such shallow cures never touch the depravity that lurks deep within, clinging to our every motion. However much we groan and flounder, we cannot find a way out. (Institutes II.2.3)

This is why we need to reflect on two main things: first, to what purpose God made us and endowed us with such splendid gifts, and second, to realize how unable we are to recover our “original nobility.” (Institutes II.1.3) This would be our true wisdom.

Since Adam’s rejection of God’s authority was “no light sin,” but “a detestable crime,” God was perfectly just in punishing him with estrangement. Adam should have been content with his lot, and should have waited God’s time to fulfil His implied promise of eternal life. As it was, he showed ingratitude, pride, ambition, contempt, unbelief and readiness to listen to Satan rather than God. His unfaithfulness and rebellion were therefore inexcusable. (Institutes II.1.4)

His estrangement from God inevitably produced “the death of his soul.” Because God dealt with him as the representative head of mankind, all his natural posterity were ruined along with him. As the old rhyme has it: “In Adam’s fall we sinned all.” Consequently, instead of being born wise, good, truthful and righteous, we come into this world foolish, evil, liars and unjust. This “depravation of a nature previously good and pure” is called original sin.

Fully aware that we resent being treated as guilty through the sin of someone else, and that Pelagius proposed an easy way out that is nothing but “profane fiction,” Calvin invokes Augustine in
insisting that, far from being mere imitators of Adam, we “bear inborn defect from our mother’s womb.” From our very conception, we “are born infected with the contagion of sin.” Romans 5 and Psalm 51 teach this clearly. (Institutes II.1.5) Not one of us, then, remains “untouched by the guilt of iniquity.” This explains why we are all by nature “children of wrath.” (Ephesians 2.3) Believers and unbelievers alike beget “guilty children,” the product of a “corrupted nature.” (Institutes II.1.7)

If this is not enough to make us ashamed, Calvin next reminds us of our actual transgressions, which proceed from our corrupt nature, just as rotten fruit is borne by a rotten tree. Our nature is not merely “destitute of all good,” it is “fertile and fruitful of every evil.” (Institutes II.1.8) Because sin’s pollution reaches to every part of us, we need to be renewed in every part. (Institutes II.1.9)

In reflecting on our faults, Calvin warns, let us not dare to blame God for them. Our destruction is from ourselves. Neither should we suggest that God could have intervened to prevent Adam sinning. We must incriminate ourselves. “Having acquired righteousness by God’s kindness,” we foolishly threw it away. (Institutes II.1.10-11)

For Calvin, then, sin is an hereditary evil. Though he does not attempt to explain how it is transmitted from one person to another, he is wholly realistic in calling us to know ourselves as sinners, and lament the fact that our hearts are nothing but factories of evil, churning out actual sins as on a production line.

Our Recovery by Christ
The solution God has provided for our lamentable condition should astonish us. In an act of pure mercy, He made His Son the Head of a new human race, whom He would redeem by obeying where we have failed, shedding His precious blood as the penalty for our sin, and repairing our ruined nature by giving us His Holy Spirit. “We must” therefore “seek all the parts of our salvation in
Jesus Christ, for we shall not find a single drop of it anywhere else.” (Pastoral Epistles 335)

Our recovery by Christ, claims Calvin, may be known by examining ourselves. Here, a host of factors come into play. But “since the entire blessing of redemption consists mainly in . . . remission of sins and spiritual regeneration,” we must focus only on the chief proofs that our sins have been forgiven and that we are born again. (Philippians-Colossians 159)

We may know whether or not our sins are remitted by our faith in Christ’s atoning death. Let the patriarch be our example: “the faith of Abraham was directed to the blood of Christ.” (Genesis I.355) So must ours: “it is . . . to the blood of Christ alone that we must look for the atonement of our sins.” (Psalms II.294) “It is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to sprinkle our consciences inwardly with the blood of Christ.” When He does so, “the sense of guilt” is removed from our conscience, and “access into the presence of God” is secured. (Psalms II.295)

Paul’s very reason for urging the Corinthians to examine themselves whether they were in the faith is to assure them of their conversion. Appealing to their conscience that they had received the true doctrine of Christ from him as a faithful ambassador, and not from a false prophet, he reminds them that all faithful preaching and saving faith are related as mother and daughter.

Furthermore, faithful preaching “serves to prove the assurance of faith,” that believers may be fully “persuaded that they are the members of Christ, and have Him remaining in them.” When all doubt is removed, their safe reposing in the sheer favour of God proves that they have “right faith.” (Commentary on 2 Corinthians 13.5)

Inseparable from this is a further “true proof of faith,” namely, “when we never suffer ourselves to be torn away from Christ.” (John II.81) However feeble this faith may be, it is “still approved
by God.” (*Hebrews* 303) The question is then: do we bring nothing before God except Christ? And do we abide in Him?

**Further Marks of Grace**

Yet, while “it is . . . faith alone which justifies . . . the faith which justifies is not alone.” (*Tracts* III.152) Therefore we should examine ourselves “each day” to see if we are making progress. (*Thessalonians* 387) Certain marks of grace (or ‘daughters of faith’) will indicate whether or not we are growing in holiness, or backsliding, or playing the hypocrite.

First, have we repented of all our sins? **Repentance** “not only immediately follows faith, but is produced by it.” (*Institutes* III.3.1) It is an essential mark of true conversion, for “whenever redemption is mentioned,” Scripture exhorts us “to repentance.” (*Isaiah* III.383) God warns us that “we never obtain forgiveness of sins without repentance.” (*Corinthians* II.275) This “true and peculiar work of the Holy Spirit” (*Isaiah* I.80) produces “grief on account of sin, together with self-condemnation” (*Genesis* II.96) Its work is to “tear up our sins by the roots, and thoroughly devote ourselves to God.” (*Genesis* II.110) As a life-long grace, repentance may be known through self-examination, and if we persevere to the end, we shall be assured of eternal life. (*Tracts* II.178; *Jeremiah* I.261-2)

Second, do we know anything of the conflict between indwelling sin and the grace of God? When we find “the law of God . . . which is the rule of righteousness,” and to which we consent, struggling against the tyrannous law of sin within us, we may be sure that we possess “that spiritual part which has been regenerated by God.” In *Galatians* 5, this conflict is described as between flesh and spirit. Torn between the two, we find ourselves “impelled by contrary desires,” till we feel like two different characters. Our “evil lusts” coerce our “spiritual desires,” which are “wholly opposed to them.” (*Commentary on Romans* 7.21-22) We hardly need to examine ourselves to discover this warfare; it afflicts and wearies us every day.
Third, do we strive to live solely by the Word of God? This is a sure proof of regeneration, for “a strict adherence to the Word of God constitutes spiritual chastity.” The holiness that springs from the Word is genuine, and not counterfeit. (Psalms IV.240) Since “God cannot approve of anything that is not supported by His Word,” “it is the highest virtue to ask nothing beyond the Word of God.” (Isaiah II.27; I.240)

For Calvin, adherence to the Word of God means two things: strict obedience to God’s commands, and a believing application of His promises. “We cannot rely on His promises without obeying His commandments.” (Harmony of the Gospels 1.219) In fact, “we never really and from the heart obey except when we rely on His promises.” (Habakkuk-Haggai 343) This is so because “all the commandments of God contain a hidden promise.” (Acts I.349) [Often, the promise is not hidden; e.g. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Acts 16.31. Ed.]

**a. Commands**

When we enlist in God’s service, we must resolve to obey His commands “not partially, but universally.” (Four Last Books of Moses I.346) Noah provides us with an excellent example, for he “obeyed God, not in one particular only, but in all.” (Genesis I.261) Furthermore, our obedience must be peremptory: “As soon as God issues any command, we must obey, even if our senses refuse.” (Ezekiel I.164) So then, “it is a genuine proof of obedience when we simply obey God, however numerous the obstacles.” (Jonah-Nahum 24) By examining ourselves, we may know whether or not we are obedient to His commands.

Universal obedience [not to be confused with perfect obedience] is motivated by both faith and love; for there can be “no obedience without faith” (Isaiah IV.390), and we will never actually obey God till we love Him. (Harmony of the Gospels III.58) Faith and love combine when, hearing the Lord addressing us in His Word, we obey Him. (Isaiah IV.393) It is His Word that directs and channels our obedience, and it is our faith and love that move us to
obey. Thus, obedience to His commandments “is the source . . . of all right knowledge of God.” (Institutes I.7.2) And when we know God aright, we know ourselves aright. (Institutes I.1.1)

b. Promises
With respect to the promises, Calvin’s caution shows itself in two crucial statements: first, “we are not qualified for enjoying the promises unless we have received the remission of our sins” (Corinthians II.137); second, “the promises of God should be believed by us.” (Isaiah III.217)

Yet because “whatever God promises belongs to the elect,” and not to all (Jeremiah III.128), we must know within ourselves whether or not we feel the need of what is promised. It is when we are “weighed down by adversity, or involved in very great distress,” or ensnared by a sin, that we may lay hold of the promises and so break through our trials. (Psalms I.36; Harmony of the Gospels I.340) Once we are convinced of God’s promised ability to meet our case, “we are to cherish the hope” His promises bring us till He fulfils them. (Jeremiah V.276)

This may mean waiting some time, for “God has His own seasons to fulfil what He has promised,” so “His people must wait as long as God pleases.” Meanwhile, He is testing us “under the cross.” (Habakkuk-Haggai 307; 309) Indeed, “there is no place for faith if we expect God to fulfil immediately what He promises.” (Habakkuk-Haggai 68) Nevertheless, when by faith we arm ourselves with them, “we may with courageous hearts follow wherever He may call us.” (Zechariah-Malachi 217)

In sum, by knowing that we sincerely ‘trust and obey’ God, we may assure our hearts before Him.

Fourth, love to both God and others is a sure proof that we are born again. Since it embraces all else, “the only rule for living religiously is to love God.” (Commentary on 1 John 2.15)
When we love God we also love the brethren, for “the whole of righteousness is included in brotherly love.” True, “the love of God holds . . . the first place,” yet love to the brethren is inseparable from it. Brotherly love is thus a sure “evidence of a transition from death to life.” (Commentary on 1 John 3.10,14)

On the other hand, love of the world (which Calvin defines as “corruptions of every kind, and the abyss of all evils”) is clear proof that we are not of God. That is, if we are “captivated” by the “pleasures, delights” and “allurements” that “withdraw” us “from God,” and make ourselves “slaves to earthly lusts,” we prove conclusively that we “cannot be of God.” (Commentary on 1 John 2.15)

If faith is the foundation, and love the top-stone, then “faith and love” are “the sum total of godliness.” (Thessalonians 354) By these we may know that we have had our sins pardoned and our hearts renewed by grace.

To confirm all, Calvin refers to David. In face of malicious slander, he appeals to God Himself to examine and prove his integrity. “Nor does he merely clear himself of outward sins,” comments Calvin; “he glories also in the uprightness of his heart, and the purity of its affections.” Placing himself within the circle of God’s searchlight “shows how intimately acquainted he was with himself, when he durst offer to submit the whole recesses of his heart to the examination of God.” Such boldness before “God’s judgment-seat” proves beyond doubt that David had already “honestly and thoroughly searched himself.” (Commentary on Psalm 26.2)

One final area needs to be explored: participation in the Lord’s Supper. In connection with Paul’s charge to the Corinthians to examine themselves, Calvin cautions us not to “approach” the table unless we are “properly and duly prepared.”
Should we ask what kind of preparation is required, he answers: not the *auricular confession* of the Papists, who “examine their life carefully and anxiously, that they may unburden all their sins in the ear of the priest,” making him “privy to their vileness.” “This holy examination of which Paul speaks is widely different from torture,” Calvin assures us. “If you would wish to use aright the benefit afforded by Christ” in the Supper, “bring faith and repentance.” Try yourself by these, he urges. And though perfection is not called for, they must contain certain ingredients: love for, and unity with the brethren. Also, “if . . . thou aspirest after the righteousness of God with the earnest desire of thy mind, and trembled under a view of thy misery, dost wholly lean upon Christ’s grace, and rest upon it, know that thou art a worthy guest to approach the table.” (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11.28*)

**Conclusion**

From Calvin’s teaching on self-knowledge, we gather that we should never forget our original state of integrity, nor cease to bemoan our present state of guilt, depravity, and helplessness. Even when the grace of Christ has restored us to our forsaken God, we should still examine ourselves in case of self-deception and spiritual stagnation. The remains of indwelling sin will never leave us alone till God removes us to heaven.

Particularly when we propose to remember the Saviour in the Supper He instituted, we should examine ourselves; and when we are falsely accused we should appeal to God Himself, having previously searched our hearts.

Let us welcome His scrutiny of our character, motives, principles, thoughts, desires, words and actions. Let us desire Him, as the great Searcher of hearts, to purge us from all iniquity, correct all our doctrinal errors, rectify our misconduct, and make His way plain before our face. Then we may be able to pray with David: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139.23-24)