

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 - Chapter 1

“THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND THAT OF OURSELVES ARE CONNECTED. HOW ARE THEY INTERRELATED?”

Do we start doing theology by reflecting on God or on ourselves? This is the question with which John Calvin (1509-1564) began his amazing theological work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion. (Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion 1; Editor: John T. McNeill, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; The Westminster Press, Philadelphia) Calvin’s views form the foundation for historical Presbyterianism.

Summary: Calvin believes that our knowledge of God is somehow tied up in our knowledge of ourselves. He writes, *“Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves”* (p.35). He argues that it is not clear which comes first. But he is abundantly clear that when we human beings take stock of ourselves we will 1) come to understand that there must be a God because of the wonder of the human body and mind and 2) see that our miserable state (referring to the evils of humanity) causes us to look to God hoping that in God we will discover the *“the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness....”* (p.36). This leads Calvin to say, *“...and we cannot seriously aspire to God before we begin to become displeased with ourselves”* (p.37). What he means is that desperate times (sin and evil) call for desperate measures (seeking God’s help).

Even so, Calvin states that unless we first look upon God’s face, we will never see that our lives are filled with *“foulness, folly and impurity”* (p.37). The reason we cannot see ourselves accurately without seeing God first is because we create our own vision of “the good” by which we judge everything. His example is that if someone is only shown black objects they might believe that a dirty white object is clean. He continues by asserting that if we look no higher than the earth for what is good and right we can believe ourselves to be “demigods.” If, however we are willing to look to God and see the absolute (moral) perfection of God, then we can put our lives in an appropriate perspective.

He concludes the chapter, as he usually does, by offering Biblical examples. He lists multiple passages from the Old Testament in which people from Abraham, to Isaiah, to Job see God for who God is, and come to understand that they are not in the same moral league as the creator. They also discover their need to know God more fully.

Reflection: For most of us in the 21st century, Calvin’s “low” view of humanity may be a bit disconcerting. We live in a time and place in which people are considered basically good rather than basically bad. Nonetheless, I believe that Calvin gets it right in his assertion that as human beings we create our own visions of what “the right” ought to be. All we have to do is look at slavery, the Holocaust, and the brutality of ISIS and we begin to realize that even if we were to assert that people are born basically good, something happens which causes them to act in evil ways which they then declare to be good. In addition, these people also declare their actions to be God’s will. Thus, it would appear to be vitally important for us to try to discover who God is so that we can know what and who we are supposed to be.

Questions:

1. Do you believe people are basically born good or in sin? Why?
2. What are some of the moral values in our society that might be those God would choose?
3. How have you tried to know God more fully?