

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 13 – Part 2

IN SCRIPTURE, FROM THE CREATION ONWARD, WE ARE TAUGHT ONE ESSENCE OF GOD, WHICH
CONTAINS THREE PERSONS

In our last article (Book 1 – Chapter 13 (lesson 1)) we looked at Calvin’s defense of the orthodox (meaning accepted by most churches) view of the Trinity. This can be summed up as, God is one (Calvin uses the term, one essence) but is also experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Calvin speaks of these as three persons). Thus God is one but three. As I noted, this is probably the most difficult of all Christian doctrines to fully, or even partially, understand. What we need to also remember is that there were other churches (non-orthodox, or heretical...take your pick) which did not believe in the Trinity. In fact early in the life of the church, the Nestorian Church (which stretched from Persia to India to China and which did not believe in the Trinity) was much larger than the Roman Church. Though the Christians in Europe had long believed in the triune nature of God, in the time of Calvin more and more people began to question this doctrine. In order to prove that the orthodox (Trinitarian) position was correct, Calvin not only had to explain it, but he had to prove that it was Biblical as well. In this lesson we will look at his Biblical proofs for the Divinity of both Jesus and the Spirit.

Summary: Calvin begins with a discussion of the “Word.” While many of us are familiar with the “Word” from the Gospel of John, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...*” (John 1:1), it is important to understand that the term “Word” had a long history within Judaism. The Word was equated with the eternal wisdom of God. This wisdom was not a collection of sayings, but was somehow alive and intimately a part of God. Proverbs 8:22 and 8:30 put it this way, and this is Wisdom speaking, “*The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago...then I was beside God like a master worker.*” Calvin writes. “*It is necessary to understand the Word as begotten (meaning not created like you and I were created) of the Father before time.*” (pg. 129) This connection of the Word with God is essential to Calvin’s arguments about the divinity of both Jesus and the Spirit, because the Word is also connected with Jesus and the Spirit.

Calvin begins with a defense of the Spirit as being divine because it is the voice of Wisdom. Calvin writes, “*If that Spirit (meaning the Holy Spirit)...was the Spirit of the Word, we infer without any doubt that he was truly God.*” (pg. 129) In other words if God=Word and Word=Spirit then Spirit=God.

Calvin next takes up the divinity of Jesus by reminding us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Thus God=Word, Word=Jesus, Jesus=God. Calvin also offers a defense of Jesus’s divinity from the Old Testament from Isaiah 9:6 (among several Old Testament references) which reads, “*For a child has been born for us, a son is given to us...and he is named...Mighty God, Everlasting Father....*” He continues with New Testament proofs from Paul where the Apostle refers to Jesus as “*Lord of Hosts*” (Romans 9:32-33), declares that Jesus will judge all people (Romans 14:10) and states that Jesus was in the form of God (Philippians 2:6). The first two passages give to Jesus power which had previously only been given to God. The third passage shows God and Jesus intimately connected for all of time. Finally Calvin turns to Jesus’ miracles (miracles which God alone could do). As added proof Calvin refers to the baptismal formula where Jesus calls upon the church to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally, he sums up his position: “*Namely that when we profess to believe in one God...which we comprehend as three persons...Therefore whenever the name of God is mentioned without particularization, there are designated no less the Son and the Spirit than the Father.*” (pg. 144)

Reflection: The importance of maintaining this position is not simply to defend Orthodoxy, but to defend the understanding that when we view Jesus, we are viewing God; and that when we are touched by the Spirit of God, we are being touched by both Jesus and God. If this were not the case then in Jesus’ teachings and in the Spirit’s actions we would not be interacting with the one true living God.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Paul’s Biblical arguments for the divinity of Jesus and the Spirit?
2. What is your conception of the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit?
3. Do you see Jesus as more human or divine? Why?