

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 14 – Part 2
EVEN IN THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE AND OF ALL THINGS, SCRIPTURE BY
UNMISTAKABLE MARKS DISTINGUISHES THE TRUE GOD FROM FALSE GODS

In this chapter Calvin continues his arguments for understanding God as a particular kind of God. He does so by addressing four topics: creation itself, angels, the devil/demonic and the spiritual lessons of creation. This article will address Calvin's views on angels.

Summary: In and around the time in which Calvin wrote, there was great speculation as to the nature and role of angels. In light of this what he wants to do is to put the discussion of angels in its proper place; that of the scriptures. Calvin writes, *"Not to take too long, let us remember here, as in all religious doctrines, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety; not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters anything except what has been imparted to us by God's Word. Furthermore, in the reading of scripture we ought ceaselessly to endeavor and seek out and meditate upon those things which make for edification"* (pg. 164). In other words, Calvin is encouraging his readers to stick with what is known about angels in scripture rather than getting caught up in popular speculation.

So what do the scriptures teach about angels? Calvin offers this definition, *"...that angels are celestial spirits whose ministry and service God uses to carry out all things he has decreed"* (pg.165). He continues, *"...that angels are dispensers and administrators of God's beneficence toward us. For this reason scripture recalls that they keep vigil for our safety, take up themselves our defense, direct our ways, and take care that some harm may not befall us"* (pg. 166). Calvin then offers a wide variety of textual proofs from the Psalms, prophets, Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In terms of Jesus we are reminded that angels ministered to Christ after his temptation and announced Jesus' resurrection.

The next topic which is addressed is that of guardian angels. Calvin is not really sure what to do with this. *"But whether individual angels have been assigned to individual believers for their protection, I dare not affirm with confidence"* (pg. 167). He then follows with some scriptural observations from Daniel about angels with specific nations to watch over, but concludes, *"...I do not know whether one ought to infer that each individual has the protection of his own angel"* (pg. 167). He also rejects the idea that each person has two angels, one good and one bad that are attached to each person.

Calvin concludes his discussion of angels by making several observations. The first is that we ought not to try to decide which angels are great than others. Though some angels such as Michael, appear to have a greater position than other angels, Calvin encourages his readers to let some mystery about angels remain. Second, angels are real, and not simply *"impulses that God inspires in men or those examples of his power which he puts forth"* (pg. 169). Third, we are reminded that the angels are not God; that the divine glory does not rest in them. They are creatures just like the rest of us. Finally we are to spend our time focusing on God and not on angels, for only God is worthy of our attention.

Reflection: What is fascinating to me about Calvin's discussion is that it could be a discussion contained within any number of books on the shelves of modern day religious bookstores. For some reason we human beings have a fascination with angels. Wikipedia lists around 35 films (with actors ranging from Nelson Eddie to Nicholas Cage) that concern angels and Google returns almost 87 million references to them. In some ways, we might suppose that angels matter because they demonstrate a concrete caring of our creator. Whatever your take on angels however, I would argue that Calvin has it right when he encourages us to focus on God and God alone, as what matters.

Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on angels?
2. What is your favorite angel' story?
3. Why do you think that we are still so fascinated by the angelic?