

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 14 – Part 3
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 three topics: creation itself, angels and the devil/demonic. This article will address Calvin's views on the devil/demonic.

Summary: The devil and the demonic were considered to be concrete realities in the day and time in which Calvin lived and worked. Nonetheless Calvin is still forced to defend the existence of the devil/demonic and does so by offering a thorough discussion of their reality and what it means for believers.

Calvin begins with a reminder that scripture does not speak about the devil in order that we become fascinated by him, but that we be forearmed against his temptations. *"All that scripture teaches us concerning devils aims at arousing us to take precaution against their strategies and contrivances, and also to make us equip ourselves with those weapons which are strong and powerful enough to vanquish these most powerful foes."* (pg. 172) We need these precautions because devils are, *"...an enemy who is the very embodiment of rash boldness, of military prowess, of crafty wiles, of untiring zeal and haste, or every conceivable weapon and of skill in the science of warfare."* (pg. 173) In a sense Calvin understood life to be a continuing battle in which the forces opposed to God relentlessly attempt to deceive and overwhelm God's people.

This enemy, Calvin notes, is not a single devil but many. *"...scripture makes known that there are not one, not two, nor a few foes, but great armies, which wage war against us...we are therefore taught by these examples that we have to wage war against an infinite number of enemies..."* (pg. 173, 174) As regards the "devil" we read *"But the frequent mention of Satan or the devil in the singular denotes the empire of wickedness opposed to the Kingdom of Righteousness."* (pg. 174) Nonetheless, this kingdom of evil has at its head a prince who holds sway over them just as Christ holds sway over the church.

Before Calvin concludes this section he needs to deal with three very important matters. The first is to acknowledge that even though Satan was created by God, Satan's evil is not God's fault. *"Yet, since the devil was created by God, let us remember that this malice, which we attribute to his nature (Satan's), came not from his creation but from his perversion."* (pg. 175) Second, Calvin wants to make clear that Satan is not God's equal, but stands under God's power. *"Therefore Satan is under God's power...and that when we say that Satan resists God...we at the same time assert that this resistance and this opposition are dependent upon God's sufferance."* (pg. 176) In fact Satan *"...carries out only those things which have been divinely permitted to him and so he obeys his Creator, whether he will or not, because he is compelled to yield to him service whenever God impels."* (pg. 176) Third, we can be assured that God will win out over the powers of evil. *"And Christ, by dying, conquered Satan, who had the "power of death" and triumphed over all his forces, to the end that they might not harm the church."* (pg. 177)

Reflection: For many of us the entire discussion of the devil/demonic is one that we have relegated to television and the movies. However, I believe that if we "transport" ourselves to the time of Calvin we will appreciate the sense of the demonic. In a prescientific world, filled with brutal warfare, violence, the regular reoccurrence of the Black Death along with high infant and childhood mortality and you begin to get a picture of a world in which the demonic does not seem far away. In addition the church had focused on the demonic as a means of explaining evil in the world.

Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on the devil/demonic?
2. How would you explain the problem of evil in the world?
3. Why do you think that the demonic still fascinates people in the 21st Century?