

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

“WHAT IT IS TO KNOW GOD AND TO WHAT PURPOSE THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM TENDS”

Calvin began his work by asserting that we need to begin our exploration of theology (the study of God) by doing just that, learning about God. The first question he raises is how ought we to begin this adventure of coming to know God.

Summary: Calvin opens with a definition of knowing God. *“Now the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory (and) what is our advantage to know him”* (p.39). If we decode this, Calvin is asserting that true knowledge of God is not esoteric reflections on God, but that it entails knowing how we ought to relate to God, as well as why we ought to relate to God. He continues that this kind of knowledge is greater than the *“primal and simple knowledge”* (p.40) which any human being could get about God from looking at nature itself even if Adam had not sinned (Calvin believed that not only human beings were corrupted in Adam’s fall but that nature was corrupted as well). And even if someone could see God in nature, it would not be the same knowledge one would have by knowing God through Jesus as redeemer.

Calvin then proceeds to offer us a series of reasons why we ought to give God honor. These include God being the fountain of every good and sustainer and regulator of the universe. As regards humanity, God rules over it in his righteousness and judgment, bears with humanity in his mercy, watches over it by protecting it and offers it wisdom, light, and truth. We are to wait on these things and then when they come, give glory to God. Calvin then defines piety as *“that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces”* (p.41). He asserts that until human beings recognize that they owe everything to God, that God is the author of their every good and that they can only establish their happiness in him, they will never give themselves completely to God (and in essence come to know God).

Calvin next takes on those who believe that they can have some objective way of viewing God; in a sense studying God as a scientist studies a bug. He argues that this is useless knowledge because it does not teach us fear and reverence or move us to dependence upon God. Humanity can only see God clearly through the lens of the appropriate God-Creature relationship. According to Calvin a pious mind will not even speculate on what that relationship might look like. Instead the pious mind will think only about the one true God and will give itself over to trust in God. This trust will lead the pious person to recognize God both as judge and savior; judge of the wicked and savior of the faithful. Finally a pious person will not sin, not because of the fear of punishment but because of their love and reverence for God.

Reflection: John Calvin has often been portrayed as an angry, rigid theologian who believed in an angry, rigid God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The God Calvin calls upon us to know is one who loves, guides, sustains and cares for creation and humanity. This is the God who judges the wicked to insure that justice is carried out and the one who saves those whom God calls. Calvin also makes it clear that while our response to God includes fear (reverence), it ought to be based in our love for God. Calvin wants people to know God in a relational manner; in a sense like parent and child. Thus Calvin’s theology is always practical. It is intended for the use of real people trying to come to know a real living God in order to live lives that reflect God’s desires.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin’s reasons for coming to know God?
2. How would you define piety?
3. Why do/ don’t you believe that it is important to come to know God in this way?