

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Section 1 - Chapter 4

“THE KNOWLEDGE (OF GOD) IS EITHER SMOTHERED OR CORRUPTED, PARTLY BY IGNORANCE,
PARTLY BY MALICE”

A recap of where we have been to this point. Calvin has asserted that part of the true knowledge of God consists of discovering who God wants us to be, that this knowledge is shown in piety (reverence combined with love of God) and that the knowledge of God has been implanted like a seed in the hearts of all human beings.

Summary: This chapter begins with Calvin asserting that even though God has sown the seed of religion in all human beings, only a tiny percentage of people will foster this seed, and none will bring it to full fruition. The bottom line for Calvin is that regardless of the reasons all persons will “*degenerate, from the true knowledge of*” God. (p.47) Thus there will be no piety in the world and the outcome is that people “*imagine him (God) as they have fashioned him in their own presumption.*” (p. 47) To prove his point he quotes Romans 1:22 where Paul writes that people in, “*Striving to become wise, they make fools of themselves.*” For Calvin, approaching a god of one’s own making is sinful because it shows that humans are still trying to know more than they ought to know (because God is in some ways ultimately unknowable) and that they are filled with a false confidence that they can “discover” God on their own.

Calvin continues this line of thought by asserting that as people deny God’s existence, God “fattens” (p.48) their hearts so that they cannot see God even if they desire so to do. Calvin also contends that when people do accept that there is a god, they “strip” him of his power so that all they have is an empty idol. What this means is that belief in a god will not bring about benefits of true religion. Of particular concern to Calvin are the “superstitions” that people add to religion in order that their god suit their wishes and whims. He reminds his readers that no religion is genuine unless it is joined with the truth about God.

A second sin now comes into focus. This second sin is that people do not approach God voluntarily, but must be compelled to do so. As he puts it, “*they do not come nigh until they are dragged there despite their resistance.*” (p.50) Even when people fear God and God’s judgment, rather than relent and seek God, they “*wage war*” (p.50) against God. In addition, even if they do offer some semblance of religion (including sacrifices), that religion does not change their behavior. They do not cease from “*polluting themselves with every sort of vice, and from joining wickedness upon wickedness...until they violate the holy law of the Lord...*” (p.50) They do not have any true piety (reverence for and love of God)

Reflection: A currently running commercial (as of 2017) has Ron Reagan talking about how he is proud to be an atheist and is not afraid of burning in hell. While this ad may disturb some Christians (and members of other religions) it would not have disturbed Calvin. It wouldn’t have because he saw atheism, along with the creation of other religions, as a natural outgrowth of the human condition. As those who have always tried to bend creation to our will (we are after all tool makers), he would argue that we have tried to do the same with the divine, by either denying it, or by shaping it to our will. As those within the church, I believe we need to be especially cognizant of our tendency to create God in an image that comfortably supports our own prejudices and societal norms. For when the church has done so, the god we have created is often one that is a god of hate who approved of the killing, diminishment or enslavement of any who we consider lesser than or different from ourselves.

Questions:

1. What do you make of Calvin’s assertion that people cannot find God on their own?
2. What superstitions could you see at work in the church today?
3. How important is it that our faith changes our behavior?