

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 6

SCRIPTURE IS NEEDED AS A GUIDE AND TEACHER FOR ANYONE WHO WOULD COME TO GOD THE
CREATOR

Calvin has been building his argument concerning humanity's inability to see and know God. Even though human beings ought to be able to know about God because God implanted God's own image within our minds and also because the universe itself makes it clear that there is a maker and a sustainer, many humans do not embrace or even accept the presence of God. Calvin, however, makes it clear that ultimately, without scripture no one can know God as they should.

Summary: Calvin asserts that human beings need something more than creation to know God fully. This something is scripture. Calvin puts it this way, *"It was not in vain then that he (God) added the light of his Word (scripture) by which to become known unto salvation (pg. 69-70) God did this because God "saw the minds of all men, tossed and agitated..." (pg. 70). This Word was given to the Jews as God's own flock in order that it be a "fence about them that they might not sink into oblivion as others had" (pg. 70). Calvin sees scripture as being like eye-glasses in that it gathers up "the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God" (pg. 70). One of the key thoughts here is that in scripture, "Not only does he (God) teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look" (pg. 70).*

Calvin believes that this Word was at work in and through Adam, Noah, Abraham and the rest of the patriarchs allowing them to penetrate *"to the intimate knowledge of him that in a way distinguished them from the other unbelievers" (pg.70). Even so, what they possessed was not the true doctrine that showed them the hope of eternal life. Nonetheless, they were able to see God not only as creator but as redeemer. These individuals not only knew God through looking at the universe but were given an inner knowledge that "alone quickens dead souls, whereby God is known not only as the Founder of the universe...but also in the person of the Mediator and Redeemer" (pg. 70-71). Calvin makes clear at this point that he is not yet ready to discuss the covenant with Abraham and the Jews, but that he simply wants to make it clear how scripture helps us distinguish the living God from all other supposed gods.*

In order to clarify his argument, Calvin assures us that when he speaks of scriptures as regards the patriarchs that he is not speaking of written scripture but that whether it was through *"oracles and visions or by the work of men, he put into their minds what they should hand down (about God) to their posterity" (pg. 71). This knowledge and doctrine was so engraved on their hearts that they knew it came from God and thus they were given a faith which was greater than any opinion. This leads Calvin to assert that "no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of scripture" (Pg. 72).*

Reflection: Calvin has taken great pains at the beginning of this work to build his case for the primacy of scripture. This is one of the hallmarks of the Reformation and of the Presbyterian Church, *"sola scriptura"* or scripture alone. This means that only scripture can teach us about Jesus Christ and all that we need to know for salvation and right living. Without scripture we are left to the whims of our imaginations. This is the reason that we read and preach from the scriptures and not from other books every Sunday. Though we may interpret scripture differently than did Calvin and the other Reformers, we still turn to it as our guide for the life and work of the church. What we will see in the weeks ahead is that Calvin's entire theology is built upon scripture alone.

Questions:

1. What can we know about God from scripture that nature cannot teach us?
2. What has scripture taught you about God?
3. What has scripture taught you about right living?