

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Section 1 – Chapter 7

SCRIPTURE MUST BE CONFIRMED BY THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT. THUS MAY ITS AUTHORITY BE ESTABLISHED AS CERTAIN; AND IT IS A WICKED FALSEHOOD THAT ITS CREDIBILITY DEPENDS ON THE JUDGMENT OF THE CHURCH

In the previous chapter Calvin introduced the concept that the most certain way to know God is through scripture. Even though God can be known in a limited way through nature (earth, stars and human beings) the only way to gain a sense of God's saving love is through scripture. In this section Calvin will tackle the validity of scripture; how we know it can be trusted.

Summary: Calvin begins by telling his readers that he will be discussing the authority of scripture (p. 74). He makes it clear that he believes that scripture was sent directly by God to human beings in order that we know what God desires. What this means for him is that God no longer communicates with humanity in the same way. *"Now daily oracles are not sent from heaven for it pleased the Lord to hallow his truth to everlasting remembrance in the Scriptures alones. Hence scripture obtains full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard"* (pg. 74). At this point Calvin launches into his main argument that scripture is affirmed by the Holy Spirit and not by the church. This argument matters because he does not want to give to the church (here meaning the Roman Church) the right to declare what is true or not true. *"Thus these...men, wishing to impose an unbridled tyranny under the cover of the church, do not care with what absurdities they ensnare...others, provided they can force this one idea upon the simple minded; the church has authority in all things"* (pg. 75).

Calvin continues his argument by stating that the church is built upon scripture rather than scripture being built upon the church (pg. 75). Scripture therefore does not need the church to argue that scripture is the word of God because *"Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do with their color..."* (pg. 76). This contention leads to a second point that Calvin wished to make in this chapter, that it is the Holy Spirit alone that gives scripture its credibility. The way this argument works is that human beings will only believe that the scriptures are the words of God by the work of the Spirit, thus those who disagree have not been touched by the Spirit and are therefore not worth listening to.

This belief has some practical consequences. The main one is that no one should attempt to prove that scripture is from God by arguing, or as Calvin puts it, disputing. He writes, *"Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon scripture, and that scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning"* (pg. 79).

Reflection: Since Calvin's entire theology is based on scripture and not the traditions of the Roman Church or secular philosophy, he must demonstrate the preeminence of scriptures over both. Essentially he does so by declaring that only Holy Spirit-inspired people can see scripture as the Word of God. Thus anyone who disagrees is spiritually blind to this reality. While this may seem like a self-fulfilling proof, it is based on his central theological premise; that God has all power and only those whom God chooses can see the truth and be saved. Thus he finds no reason to debate scripture's superiority. In some ways then this makes it clear that The Institutes of the Christian Religion is not an apologetic (meaning a reasoned proof of the correctness of Calvin's theology) but is instead intended to be a guide for believers to follow. Again, this is an appropriate outcome of Calvin's view of how God works in the world.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's proof of scripture as the Word of God?
2. Do you see scripture in the same way as Calvin?
3. How would you describe scripture to someone outside of the church?