

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 8

AS FAR AS HUMAN REASON GOES, SUFFICIENTLY FIRM PROOFS ARE AT HAND TO ESTABLISH THE
CREDIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

In the previous chapter Calvin made it clear that only those whose minds were opened by God through the Holy Spirit could attest that the author of scripture was God. He tells us that we ought to seek our confirmation of scripture in a higher place than reason. And because of this work by the Holy Spirit, previously inadequate proofs now affirm for the believer that scripture is the Word of God.

Summary: Calvin begins by reminding his readers that unless the Holy Spirit inspires us to see scripture as coming from God “...it will be vain to try and fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps” (pg.81). Nonetheless, Calvin continues that once the Spirit has done this, all the other arguments which were “not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of scripture in our minds-become very useful aids” (pg.82). This leads Calvin to speak of scripture in a lovingly, reverent manner. “What wonderful confirmation ensues when, with keener study, we ponder the economy of divine wisdom, so well ordered and disposed; the completely heavenly character of its doctrine, savoring nothing earthly; the beautiful agreement of all of its parts...” (pg.82).

Calvin then moves into his listing of the proofs available to believers that should confirm their view of scripture. He begins by arguing that scripture, even though written in ordinary words, has the ability to impact the lives of individuals far more than any other written work “...they will allure you, delight you, move you, and enrapture you in wonderful measure” (pg.82). He believes that it ought to be obvious to all that scriptures “breathe something divine” (pg.82). Even though there are some sections which contain great beauty, the scriptures show power beyond their language.

Calvin continues by pointing to the antiquity of scripture as proclaiming its truth. He claims that the scriptures are older than any other religious writing. This means scripture “outstrips all other writings in antiquity” (pg.84). He offers Moses and his miracles as proof of scriptural truth. Moses is proof because he tells stories of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. Moses’ miracles are proof because they are according to Calvin “incontestable” (pg.86). Calvin continues by offering prophecy as proof because all of the predictions of the prophets came true, even when more than a hundred years have passed. To these he adds the preservation of the Law and the Prophets, the simplicity of their New Testament (meaning the “humble and lowly style” (Pg.90)), the testimony of the church and the willingness of martyrs to die for the faith.

Reflection: Calvin had a very straightforward view of scripture. It was the literal Word of God. While there are many people today who still believe this, Biblical Criticism (meaning analyzing scripture through literary, historical and textual lenses) has helped many modern day Christians understand that scripture, while needing to be taken seriously, does not have to be taken literally (as Calvin did). What this means is that while scripture contains all we need to know for faith and life (it helps us believe in and follow Jesus) all of its stories are not historically accurate. We have also realized that the scriptures contain contradictory stories (examine how Judas dies) and values (should God’s people have a king or not?). Nonetheless the scriptures remain our holy book and the authority to which we turn for guidance and direction. They form the foundation of who we are.

Questions:

1. What is your view of Calvin’s proofs for the truth of scripture?
2. What helps you to understand scripture as the Word of God?
3. Where do you see scripture guiding your life?