

## A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

### The Knowledge of God the Creator

#### I. Review from Book I, Chapters 6-12

- A. God's "exhibition of his majesty" (1.6.1) in creation removes all excuse for ingratitude and idolatry.
- B. So, God has graciously given His Word to us as "another and better help" by which to know Him.
- C. These "spectacles" become useful only by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts bearing witness to Scripture's authority.
- D. Conclusion: "...we readily understand that we ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God." (1.9.2)

#### II. "What Kind of God is He?": God as Trinity

*But there is another special mark by which he designates himself, for the purpose of giving a more intimate knowledge of his nature. While he proclaims his unity, he distinctly sets it before us as existing in three persons. These we must hold, unless the bare and empty name of Deity merely is to flutter in our brain without any genuine knowledge... Since it must be held certain that there is one God, not more than one, we conclude that the Word and Spirit are of the very essence of God... On the other hand, the Scriptures demonstrate that there is some distinction between the Father and the Word, and the Word and the Spirit; but the magnitude of the mystery reminds us of the great reverence and soberness which ought to be employed in discussing it. It seems to me, that nothing can be more admirable than the words of Gregory Nazianzen: "I cannot think of the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one." ...[U]nder the name God is understood a single, simple essence, in which we comprehend three persons or hypostases. Therefore, whenever the name of God is mentioned without particularization, the Son and Spirit, not less than the Father, is meant. But when the Son is joined with the Father, relation comes into view, and so we distinguish between the Persons. (1.13.2, 1.13.17-20)*

##### **The Trinity – Step by Step:**

- (a) God is one and there is only one God
- (b) The Scriptures affirm that Father, Son and Spirit are equally divine
- (c) The Scriptures affirming (b) also affirm that Father, Son and Spirit are distinct, permanent "persons" or "subsistences" within the unity of the divine being.
- (d) These three subsistences coinhere or mutually indwell in the being of God in such a way that all the divine attributes find full expression and satisfaction within God's own being.

1. What importance does Calvin give to the trinity for our understanding what God is like?

*"The knowledge of God set forth in Scripture...invites us first to fear God, then to trust in Him." (1.10.2)*

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matt 28:19)*

*"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (1 Cor 13:14)*

2. Are there any adequate analogies to describe the trinity? Why do they succeed or fail? Which two directions of error can we go when discussing the trinity? How does Gregory of Nazianzus (see above) help us here?

**Oneness Mania... Arianism** – a 4<sup>th</sup> century heresy that claimed the Son was an infinitely exalted creature (i.e., Jesus was created with a "similar substance", or *homoiousios*, with the Father)

*"...impiety boiled over when the Arians began most wickedly to hate and curse the word homoousios." (1.13.4)*

**Threeness Mania... Sabellianism** – a 4<sup>th</sup> century heresy that claimed the Father, Son, and Spirit are three different aspects or modes of the one God.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.<sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God.<sup>3</sup> All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:1-3)*

3. Is all this debate over non-Biblical words really worth the headache? Do words like “trinity” and “essence” and “person” really play an important role in our view of God? How does their use confirm the reality of our fallen nature?

*Sabellius says that the Father, Son, and Spirit, indicate some distinction in God. Say, they are three, and he will bawl out that you are making three Gods. Say, that there is a Trinity of Persons in one Divine essence, you will only express in one word what the Scriptures say, and stop his empty prattle...I was long ago made aware, and, indeed, on more than one occasion, that those who persistently quarrel over words nurse a secret poison; and, therefore, that it is more expedient to challenge them deliberately, than to speak more obscurely to please them. (1.13.5)*

4. How do the three Persons of the trinity display unity of purpose in salvation while occupying different roles? How does this give us a model for how to live in marriage? In the workplace?

*“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.’” (John 4:34)*

*“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,<sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth...” (John 14:16-17)*

### III. Is the Trinity Practical?: God's Love at Creation

*Meanwhile, being placed in this most beautiful theatre, let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the clear and manifest works of God...Undoubtedly were one to attempt to speak in due terms of the inestimable wisdom, power, justice, and goodness of God, in the formation of the world, no grace or ornament of speech could equal the greatness of the subject. Still there can be no doubt that the Lord would have us constantly occupied with such holy meditation, in order that...we may not only run our eye over them with a hasty, and, so to speak, fleeting glance, but dwell long upon them, seriously and faithfully turn them in our minds, and every now and then bring them to recollection...Nor is it unimportant to observe, that he divided the formation of the world into six days, though it had been in no respect more difficult to complete the whole work, in all its parts, in one moment than by a gradual progression. But he was pleased to display his providence and paternal care towards us in this, that before he formed man, he provided whatever he foresaw would be useful and salutary to him. How ungrateful, then, were it to doubt whether we are cared for by this most excellent Parent, who we see cared for us even before we were born! How impious were it to tremble in distrust, lest we should one day be abandoned in our necessity by that kindness which, before we were born, displayed itself in a complete supply of all good things! ...Nothing, therefore, which concerns our safety will ever be wanting. To conclude, in one word; as often as we call God the Creator of heaven and earth, let us remember that the distribution of all the things which he created are in his hand and power, but that we are his sons, whom he has undertaken to nourish and bring up in allegiance to him, that we may expect the substance of all good from him alone, and have full hope that he will never suffer us to be in want of things necessary to salvation, so as to leave us dependent on some other source; that in everything we desire we may address our prayers to him, and, in every benefit we receive, acknowledge his hand, and give him thanks; that thus allured by his great goodness and beneficence, we may study with our whole heart to love and serve him. (1.14.20-22)*

1. Do you look at creation with a “fleeting glance”? What does Calvin say we ought to think about when we look at creation??