

Week 2 Sensus Divinitatis: Knowing God and Ourselves and the Revelation in Creation

1. 1-4 Knowing God and Ourselves
2. 1.5.1-4, 6-15 God Revealed in Creation

1. Calvin's Starting Point Knowing God and Ourselves

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern (1.1.1)

a) *Not meditation / self-awareness to find God*

The main point is in 1560 opening: 'In knowing God, each of us also knows himself.'¹...

It counters our tendency to be 'quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom and virtue, [and] we flatter ourselves most sweetly' (1.1.2)

... but also we can know God by examination of ourselves.

b) *God, Humanity and Sensus Divinitatis (sense of the divine, SD for short)*

Note that there are different ways of reading Calvin on this topic. So for example: What kind of knowledge does the SD provide

That Calvin does not specify these sort of details himself has implications:

- (i) These different readings are *developments of Calvin's thought*
- (ii) The implication is that Calvin may have been deliberate in this strategy.

c) *Why would Calvin be deliberately ambiguous?*

- (i) SD does not lead anywhere in-and-of itself
- (ii) Calvin uses it to pull out the rug from the feet of an over confident humanity: one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power' another to 'embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ'. [cf Book 1 and 2 of the *Institutes*]

d) *Nevertheless, there is a SD but it can be misused*

'The pious mind does not dream up for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates the one and only true God.' (1.2.2)

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. (1.3.1)

1. Paganism

'Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God.' (1.3.1)

2. Tool for control

the 'subtly and craft of a few to hold the simple folk in thrall' (1.3.2). It would not work if this instinctive knowledge within all people did not exist.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in John McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 36 n3.

3. Atheism

'this is sardonic laughter, for the worm of conscience, shaper than any cauterizing iron, gnaws away within.' (1.3.3)

4. Subversion of true religion, to something more palatable

'scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens.' (1.4.1)

For Calvin it is not just God's existence: (i) God is what he is, whatever people say; (ii) true knowledge about him is what is important.

Subversion by (a) the creation of idols, (b) deliberate turning away, (c) hypocrisy

Tony Lane reckons that these sections were 'a more plausible claim in the sixteenth century than the twenty-first... [and] would need to be rewritten today, when atheism is much more widespread.'² Is he right? ...

2. Revelation of God in the Wider Creation

'he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe.' (1.5.1)

But same problem as before: 'They ought, then, to break forth into praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride.' (1.5.4)

God is revealed in the pursuit of knowledge: correlation between our theory-statements and reality

- 'manifold indeed is the nimbleness of the soul [mind] with which it surveys heaven and earth... These are unfailing signs of divinity in man.' (1.5.5)
- 'Shall we, indeed, distinguish between right and wrong by that judgment imparted to us, yet will there be no judge in heaven?' asks Calvin (1.5.5). Not CS Lewis, but Plantinga / Paul Davies / Roger Penrose

[4(d)] *Pantheism* - another method of evading the true God / subverting the knowledge of God (1.5.5)

Providence points to: (a) a present and future judgment points to afterlife (1.5.6-7); (b) God's fatherly care (1.5.8). So, 'Knowledge of this sort, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God but also to awaken and encourage us to the hope of the future life.' (1.5.10)

But the problem remains: scepticism. 'It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path.' (1.5.14)

Calvin uses a metaphor of spectacles [glasses] in his discussion of Scripture: 'the invisible divinity is made manifest in such spectacles [God's workmanship], but that we have not the eyes to see this unless they be illuminated by the inner revelation of God through faith.' (1.5.14)

- The SD and Scripture are dealt with separately in the *Institutes*: one is not effectual the other is effectual in revealing God to sinners.
- Calvin drops the SD almost totally.

² Anthony Lane, *A Reader's Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 37.