

### Week 3 Book I: Self attestation of Scripture and accommodation

1. 1.6-7; 1.8.1, 13; 1.9 The Bible and the Holy Spirit  
Helm, Paul. *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), chapter 7.

The Scriptures, in the context of misusing the SD

Just as old and bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (1.6.1)

Scripture is necessary:

- Objective: 'For by his Word, God rendered faith unambiguous forever, ... superior to all opinion' (1.6.2)
- Takes us further than natural revelation: 'however fitting is may be ... to contemplate God's works ... it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word, for better to profit.' (1.6.2)
- It guides in truth: 'the [unapproachable] splendour of the divine countenance ... is like a labyrinth<sup>1</sup> unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash will all speed outside it.' (1.6.3)
- Scripture calls more effectively than nature: 'For although he also includes other uses of the law [in Ps 19, esp vv. 8-9], he means in general that, since God in vain calls all peoples to himself by the contemplation of heaven and earth, this is the very school of God's children.' (1.6.4)

### The authority of Scripture

Subjective authority: 'Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority amongst believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if the living words of God were heard.' (1.7.1)

Objective authority: not from people – not even the Church which declares the canon of Scripture.  
Because: there will be no assurance underlying the gospel if it is people who determine the authority of Scripture

It is the other way round: the Word was the basis of the church (1.7.2, Eph 2:20)

A counter argument: Augustine acknowledged the authority of the church when he wrote: 'for my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the catholic church.'

- i. 'Catholic' just means universal.
- ii. Augustine, for the sake of the argument, places himself outside the church and says well no one would believe the gospel if 'the consensus of the church did not impel them.' (1.7.3)

So if the church does not give authority to Scripture how can we know it to be true?

---

<sup>1</sup> A favourite of Calvin of the SD perverted into superstition we have seen 1.5.12. Also e.g. [Bevridge translation of 1.6.1]; 1.13.21; 3.2.2,3; 3.6.2; 3.8.1; 3.19.7; 3.21.1; 3.25.11; 4.7.13, 22.

## The self-authenticating nature of Scripture

This is a method consistent with the rest of theology: ‘credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond all doubt that God is its Author. Thus the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it... they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through are doing things backwards’ (1.7.4).

Calvin notes that there are those who argue well and valiantly for truth, but to prevent ‘instability or doubt or vacillation’ or ‘bogg[ing] at the smallest quibbles – we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reason’. (1.7.4)

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 [αὐτοπιστιστον, *autopiston*, roughly ‘self-belief’]; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. (1.7.5)

## Proofs of the authenticity of Scripture

Having just argued for the self-authenticating nature of the scriptures, Calvin spends a chapter going through such proofs and reasons!<sup>2</sup> Calvin is not proposing fideism (that that faith and reason are not compatible).

[So while] it will be vain to fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, or to confirm it with other helps. [On the other hand] What wonderful confirmations ensue when, with keener study, we ponder the economy of the divine wisdom, so well ordered and disposed; the completely heavenly character of its doctrine, savoring of nothing earthly; the beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another – as well as such other qualities as can gain majesty for the writings. (1.8.1)

*Westminster Confession of Faith* – a good distillation of Calvin’s position:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. (1.4-5)

## The Spirit and the Word

‘The supreme judge ... the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture’. (WCF 1.10)

---

<sup>2</sup> 1.8.1 Contain wisdom greater than Plato *et al*; .2 different human styles, but content contains divine thought; .3 antiquity; .4 truthfulness; .5 miracles authenticate message; .6 Moses’ miracles; .7 and his prophecies; .8 prophets’ words fulfilled against expectation; .9 divine providence in transmission of text; .10 OT preserved through tumult of history; .11 simple yet effective style; .12 the unity it has brought to church through ages and persecution; .13 the effect on those who would become martyrs, and unspecified other reasons.

Calvin's opponents (Libertines?): 'They exalted the teaching office of the Spirit', but with the result that they despised those they thought 'follow the dead and killing letter'. (1.9.1) However:

1. 'the Spirit ... has not the task of inventing new and unheard of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel.' (1.9.1)
2. How do these people recognise the Spirit's teaching? They need a 'certain mark'. (1.9.2)
3. Does this put the Spirit in bondage to the Scriptures?: 'He is the author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself.' (1.9.2)

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word. (1.9.3)

### **Accommodation**

'Accommodation' with respect to the Scriptures is the idea that 'God's word comes to us in a human way ... God chooses to submit his truth to the limiting process of being reduced to a humanly comprehensible level rather than preserve it pure in heaven.' (*New Dictionary of Theology*, 3)

Helm suggests three types of accommodation: 'morally indexed', 'human accommodation' and 'revelational accommodation'. Calvin uses the last when discussing providence and the Trinity, e.g.:

For because of our weakness ... the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. (1.17.13)

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. (1.13.1)

1. God uses concepts that we understand in order to get us to know what he is like
2. The distinction Calvin makes between God 'as he is in himself' and 'as he seems to us': so 'accommodated language is "controlled" by literal truths about God's nature.' (Helm, 192)
3. It was necessary that God to do this:  
Putting the point even more fully, what God in fact decreed was not Hezekiah's recovery, but the recovery of Hezekiah upon request, with the request being a component part of the entire decree. (Helm, 199)

Therefore:

If dialogue with God is to be real dialogue, then God's language about himself cannot be restricted to characterising himself as eternal and immutable [not changing], but he must accommodate himself to speak in ways that are characteristic of and essential to, persons in dialogue with each other. (Helm, 199)

For the post Enlightenment theologian accommodation is loose speech. 'Sometimes looseness in speech signifies waffle and incoherence. But at other times language may be loose but economical, and thus the very opposite of waffle.' (Helm, 206)