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# Calvin and Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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THE QUESTION of John Calvin's attitude towards philosophy introduces us to a controversial and ambiguous realm. There seem to be two dominant schools of thought, in the English-speaking world at least. One states that Calvin was completely free from philosophical entanglement, a purely Biblical theologian, Semitic rather than Hellenistic, a man of the Word (a picture not unlike that which Karl Barth claims for himself today). The other is the conservative Calvinism usually processed in Dutch packages, boldly proclaiming Calvin as the Christian philosopher, preferring Aristotle and ancient logic to Kant and everyone after him. Thus the American Calvinistic Congress hails the work of B. B. Warfield as the fountainhead of "classical Calvinism." In Continental Europe there is a different attitude towards our question, which views Calvin as stemming from French humanism, although not simply a humanist. In philosophy therefore he is oriented about the Graeco-Latin classicists, more Platonic than Aristotelian, like the Humanists more practical than theoretical, and much less rationalistic and systematic than later Calvinism supposed. This approach reflects the situation described by John T. McNeill: "Calvin formerly stirred debate because people agreed or disagreed with his teaching. Recently men have been in disagreement with regard to what his teaching was."<sup>2</sup>

## 1. THE STATE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

We are familiar with the fact of history that medieval theology and philosophy were virtually one and the same discipline—the "Christian philosophy" which Gilson has made his particular concern. We are also familiar with the fate of this impressive harmony of reason and faith, its collapse in late medieval philosophy, in what has been termed the "weariness with scholasticism."<sup>3</sup> The Renaissance therefore appears not as a philosophical movement, although it involved a recovery of classical learning and a revival of Platonism, in particular at the Academy of Florence. Rather, its humanism seemed to threaten all Christian thought, to be a risky business which glorified man and relied on his reason and good taste. Three groups had emerged: neo-scholastics, nominalists, and Renaissance humanists. But

1. Presidential address to the Canadian Theological Society at a joint meeting with the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies and the Canadian Church History Society at Kingston, Ont., May, 1964.

2. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 202.

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), p. 5.

as early as 1482 the Ancients (Thomists and Scotists) and the Moderns (Occamists) at the University of Paris had made common cause against the humanists.

It was an era of reaction for philosophy, chiefly because the great transition to the modern world-view had begun, to the scientific method and its consequent philosophy of science which would demand a new quality and character for philosophy itself. The humanists were the advance party, and the remnants of the medieval schools were waging a losing battle. The Reformation must be understood against this complex background, in which a pure philosophical issue is not to be discovered. The Reformers therefore are not so directly involved with the subject as we might suppose. Bertrand Russell has stated: "Philosophically, the century following the beginning of the Reformation is a barren one."<sup>4</sup> It is to the credit of Lutheran theologians that they have investigated the question of the relation of medieval philosophy to their sixteenth and seventeenth century forefathers with thoroughness and frankness. To be sure, they have explicit references in Luther himself, for instance, to spur them on—tantalizing references to Occam, Biel, and Nicolas of Lyra among others. In Calvin we have more restrained references, more implicit data, more ambiguous material concerning his humanism, for instance, and the effect on it of his "sudden conversion."

One datum exists apart from the foregoing which is most relevant in our study. That is the fact that the development of Calvinism took the direction of a Reformed Aristotelianism, producing the "classical" form already mentioned. Was this an inevitable direction, given certain things in Calvin's own thought and situation? How does it stand in relation to the humanistic Platonism which attracted Calvin himself? Does it, in short, represent a faithful continuation of Calvin? These are the questions which it poses; and although we cannot detail answers in this paper, they must not be far from our thoughts.

## 2. CALVIN AND FRENCH HUMANISM

It is important to notice that John Calvin was a second-generation Reformer. Born in 1509, he published his first work, the commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, in 1532. Erasmus was then sixty-six and Luther forty-nine. The Reformation was an established reality, and the atmosphere was one of change and reconstruction. Without entering on a detailed biographical exposition, we may note Calvin's environment as his theology developed. Here we must acknowledge the studies of the Strasbourg school, notably Pannier and Wendel, as well as the recent works of Jean Boisset and Joseph Bohatec.<sup>5</sup> Calvin was certainly a humanist in his youth. In Paris he

4. *Wisdom of the West* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 544.

5. J. Pannier, *Recherches sur l'évolution religieuse de Calvin jusqu'à sa conversion* (Strasbourg, 1924), *Calvin à Strasbourg* (Strasbourg, 1925), *Recherches sur la formation intellectuelle de Calvin* (Paris, 1931); F. Wendel, *Calvin: Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); J. Boisset, *Sagesse*

studied at the Collège de la Marche, learning from Cordier both Latin and humanism. At the Collège de Montaigu he later studied under John Major, the Occamist, began his profound Patristic learning, acquired the art of dialectical reasoning and argumentation from the austere Noël Beda, and meanwhile moved in the circle of his cousin Olivétan, William Cop, and William Budé—the latter was the most learned Hellenist in France. His interlude with the study of law at Orléans and Bourges involved also the study of Greek under Wolmar and attendance at the lectures of the distinguished humanist Alciati from Milan, whom he considered extreme and vain.

By 1532 Calvin was back in Paris, publishing his commentary on Seneca. It is a thoroughly humanist work, although some apologists see an evangelical angle in the treatment of clemency for an age of intolerance. So in his twenty-third year he discusses a classic of Stoicism; in the work he quotes from fifty-six Latin authors and twenty-two Greek. He has begun well in his chosen career: a man of letters. Later he will remark that his chief desire is still to pursue "the enjoyment of literary ease with something of a free and honorable station." But the following year, 1533, was marked by Nicolas Cop's rectorial address to the University on "Christian philosophy." Its evangelical note precipitated the flight of Cop and his young adviser Calvin. Between this and the first edition of his *Institutes*, Calvin experienced his conversion, and turned his humanist and literary vocation in the service of Reform.

The work on Seneca displays a scholarly and sympathetic approach to Stoicism, but no uncritical or passionate attachment. His authorities are Cicero and Aristotle, but he feels free to correct Stoic ethics in the light of "our religion." I do not understand Boisset's description of "anti-Stoic,"<sup>6</sup> but suggest that he is a critical humanist, judging the classical philosophy by the received Christian teaching. He observes that "Human nature is so built that we are more affected by the viewpoint of utility or of pleasure than by these Stoic paradoxes so far removed from ordinary sentiment." The concern for utility is itself humanist—a philosophy must bear fruit in an ethic, theory in practice. Professor Harbison of Princeton's history department concludes that Calvin's constant reference to the usefulness of his immense literary output over the years was a means of justifying "this continual yielding to his early zest for scholarship" so that "scholarship could be a Christian vocation of high significance."<sup>7</sup>

In French humanism we have a movement of the human spirit influenced by Florentine Platonism but pursuing its own motif of worldly wisdom and joy in creation. Of course, one can hardly group together Calvin's friend and

*et Sainteté dans la pensée de Jean Calvin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959); J. Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin: Studien zur Gedankenwelt des französischen Frühhumanismus* (Graz: Verlag H. Böhlau, 1950).

6. *Sagesse et Sainteté . . .* pp. 221, 248.  
7. E. H. Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), p. 164.

teacher Budé along with the satirist Rabelais, who ridiculed Calvin in *Pantagruel* (Calvin retorted in a sermon on Deut. 13:6–11, the command to condemn and kill him who entices to idolatry!). But what all had in common was a preference for Plato over Aristotle. That is probably too simple a statement—yet even the reform of Aristotelianism proposed by the genius of Lefèvre d'Étaples was really an attempt to harmonize Aristotle with Plato. Calvin may be identified to a great extent with this Platonic humanism. Next to the Fathers, Plato is quoted most by Calvin in the *Institutes*, for instance: once in 1536, eighteen times by 1559 (Cicero has nine references, Aristotle eight)—and almost all in outright praise. Boisset's careful analysis of the passages and the more general Platonic themes leads him to conclude: "On peut dire que pour Calvin, Platon est, comme philosophe, ce qu'Augustin est comme théologien" (p. 221). Now any theologian influenced by the Fathers is bound to be Platonic, for they were themselves influenced to varying degrees by Middle Platonism, while Augustine remained Neoplatonic in certain respects all his life. Yet Calvin has jumped over this Patristic Platonism thanks to his humanism: *ad fontes!* A purer Plato was now available through the Renaissance research, so that Calvin's Platonic themes—a hint of dualistic anthropology, even of pantheism, and especially the marked resemblance in matters political and moral—should be judged in terms of Plato's own work rather than of the mystagogue of Middle Platonism.

Is Calvin therefore to be described as a Platonist, understandable from within the context of French humanism?<sup>8</sup> A thematic parallelism may be explained on other grounds than direct influence. Besides, Calvin is a critical student of Plato. When faced with the "Nicodemites," the compromisers who wished to effect a Christian Platonist synthesis, he refutes them in strong words: "They change half Christianity into a philosophy. . . . In addition, a section of them have Platonic ideas in their heads and thus excuse most of the superstitions known to the papacy as being matters from which it is not possible to escape. This band consists almost entirely of men of letters. . . . I would prefer that all human knowledge were exterminated from the world rather than it should be the cause of cooling the enthusiasm of Christians in this way and causing them to turn away from God."<sup>9</sup> And although many French humanists regarded him as colleague (Lefèvre gave the young scholar his blessing at Nérac in 1534) yet as time went on they knew that he served another wisdom and authority. Let a modern spokesman have the last word here. In Van Gelder's study of "the two reformations" he wants to show the divergence of the "minor" (Protestant) Reformation from the "major" (Humanist). He notes Calvin's apparent humanism, but concludes that in his adherence to the general orthodox theology, "Calvin is opposite the

8. Quirinus Breen tends to overstatement of his thesis, which is nonetheless most important: *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1931); cf. Roy Battenhouse, "The Doctrine of Man in Calvin and in Renaissance Platonism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IX (Oct. 1948), for Calvin's "subterranean dependence" on the Florentine school, especially Pico della Mirandola.

9. *Excusatio ad Pseudonicodemus* (Geneva, 1549).

'major Reformation,' and close to Catholicism, much as he deviated in the working out of these points of doctrine from what was then orthodox."<sup>10</sup>

### 3. CALVIN AND SCHOLASTICISM

Did Calvin's positive (if critical) attitude towards Plato mean that he was against Aristotle? He openly repudiates the neo-scholasticism of his age; yet he continued to rely on Aristotelian categories in his theology—and later Calvinism felt justified in its Aristotelianizing trend. If the facts seem confusing, we may yet discern a pattern. At the Collège de Montaigu he had learned the traditional scholastic discipline, couched in the dialectic of argumentation. The method which had originated in the *Quaestiones disputatae* of medieval learning, later refined by Thomas Aquinas, had become oracular (witness the oral disputes and colloquies of the Reformation itself). It was this scholastic Aristotelianism, with its subtle dialectic and love of verbal exchange, which Calvin rejected. He called it a "frigid philosophy," manufactured chiefly by the "Sorbonnistes" who engaged in mere "sophistry."

Once again we must enter a qualifier for the model, in this case Calvin the anti-Aristotelian. He somewhat resembles Luther here, for Luther once remarked that he knew more of Aristotle than Thomas did—in the sense that he was free of bondage to the philosopher, free to accept only what is agreeable to the gospel.<sup>11</sup> Calvin has a positive appreciation of Aristotle's logic, and follows many of his distinctions to fruitful theological ends. Thus the familiar themes of the mean between extremes, the distinction *per se / per accidens*, the concept of analogy, and fourfold causality, have an essential place in Calvin's theology, especially in key doctrines such as election, sanctification, and eucharist. As a humanist—according to Harbison's thesis—Calvin was able to ignore scholasticism, retaining much of its value, whereas others like Erasmus and Luther reacted violently against it. Therefore "there is actually more continuity between Aquinas and Calvin than between Aquinas and either Erasmus or Luther."<sup>12</sup> In this respect there is a significant historical question which I simply raise here: Is Strasbourg the key to Reformed Aristotelianism? The city of Martin Bucer was heavily coloured by the Aristotelian tradition of the local Dominicans as well as of the educational system of Jacob Sturm. To this city came John Calvin in those critical years 1539–41, during the exile from Geneva. Here he wrote his enlarged second edition of the *Institutes* (1539) as well as the beautiful 1541 French edition, so formative of the modern French language, and the *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper*. In all of these we see certain signs of Bucer's influence, notably the increasing significance of the concept of faith as union with Christ. Also in the 1539 *Institutes* he first introduces a fourfold causality in his doctrine of election.

10. H. A. Enno Van Gelder, *The Two Reformations in the Sixteenth Century* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1961), p. 268.

11. Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard*, p. 11.

12. Harbison, *The Christian Scholar . . .*, p. 145.

After Calvin's sojourn in Strasbourg, Peter Martyr arrived, an Italian already fond of Aristotle. In this climate, where Aristotle and Scripture were balanced in alternate days' lecturing (for a time by Bucer himself), Martyr began a commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, while his disciple Zanchi became even more thoroughly Aristotelian. Probably in Zanchi and Theodore Beza we have the true origin of Reformed Aristotelianism and therefore of that "classical Calvinism" noted above. But that is another story.

Calvin's ambivalent attitude to Aristotle may be illustrated by two examples. One is the concept of *substance*. Here Calvin was very wise, making a valiant effort to qualify the traditional *quidditas* by a more dynamic definition. This is notably evident in his doctrine of the eucharist. The sixteenth century Supper-Strife, involving Romans, Lutherans, Reformed and Anabaptist, was hampered and even doomed to failure because everyone tried to work with the old medieval categories, the school distinctions. I submit that Calvin, like Peter Martyr,<sup>13</sup> launched a twofold attack, on philosophical and theological levels. Philosophically he tried to show the logical absurdity of the scholastic teaching, transubstantiation in particular. Theologically he tried to break through into a new dynamism and personalism more suited to the subject. Central was the personal union of Christ: the "substance" of this living and lordly Person demanded a new framework, only tentatively outlined by the Reformers, especially in their stress on the office of the Holy Spirit.

The second point is opposite: in this regard, Calvin remained too much the Aristotelian. I refer to the bitter controversy with the Lutherans about Christ's presence in the eucharist. Here Calvin tended to rely too much on spatial categories, and some of his disciples more so. This is a complex subject, whose bitter heritage is only lately moving towards healing in our time.<sup>14</sup> Without detailing the evidence, let me summarize by stating that the Calvinist party relied on Aristotle's dictum "no place, no body," and tended to locate—and even localize—Christ's personal presence in a "heavenly place." To be sure, they qualified this by denying that it was simply the dimension of height extended to infinity; but the Lutherans recognized the resulting predicament, and (I think) offered a better solution in such concepts as Christ's *multivolens* presence. Probably also, Martin Bucer was even more correct to condemn both sides and to insist on the power of negative thinking here: "not of this world, not of sense, not of reason"; "Let them not make a new article of faith concerning the certain place of heaven in which the body of Christ is contained."<sup>15</sup>

In terms of historical philosophy, therefore, John Calvin stands in reaction to medieval scholasticism on behalf of Platonic humanism, although

13. Cf. my book on Martyr, *The Visible Words of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957); for Calvin, *Inst.*, IV. xvii. 8–10.

14. Conversation groups in Europe and North America are currently at work; cf. the documents "A Re-examination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions," distributed by the National Lutheran Council, New York, 1964.

15. Letter to Calvin in criticism of the Zurich Consensus of 1549: *Corpus Reformatorum*, XLI, *Cal. Op.* XIII, pp. 350ff.

his use of certain categories of thought indicates his continuity with much of Aristotelian tradition. His critique of human wisdom as such is probably best illustrated from his epistemology.

#### 4. CALVIN AND HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

The basic decision in thinking is probably between ontology and epistemology, or at least as to which is determinative. If one chooses ontology, being as such is one's concern, and one can pursue what Gilson is fond of calling "the metaphysics of Exodus," the ontological implications of divine revelation, "He Who Is." It is significant that in one of his rare discussions of Reformed theology, Gilson treats not Calvin but Lecerf, and remarks that Calvinism "s'agit évidemment de soumettre la raison à la foi ou, plus exactement encore, d'interdire à la raison de parler d'autre langage que celui de la foi. Sans doute, il s'agit bien encore d'une connaissance, et d'une pensée véritable, mais d'une 'connaissance religieuse,' et d'une 'pensée religieuse,' qui présupposent explicitement la foi comme leur fondement et leur point de départ."<sup>16</sup>

Although much depends on definition here, it is surely right to say that Calvin's is not a "Christian philosophy" so much as a theology using philosophical data and method in critical fashion, that is partially. The grounds for so stating the case lie in his attitude towards human reason and so in his epistemology. A brief summary from T. F. Torrance's fine study of Calvin's doctrine of man illustrates the point: "As a natural gift, the reason is not totally destroyed, though it is seriously impaired, and totally perverted. The total perversion of the mind or the reason means that the whole inclination of the mind is in the direction of alienation from God. The reason has therefore lost its original rectitude, and is indeed alienated from right reason, until it is renewed by the Spirit through the Word."<sup>17</sup>

Now like the other Reformers, Calvin distinguishes reason as applied to "earthly things" and to "heavenly things" (e.g. *Inst.*, II.ii.12-17). He allows to the natural man a wisdom and ability in arts and science sufficient to maintain order and to advance civilization. His affection for men like Plato, Cicero, and Seneca reflects this position. God "fills and moves and invigorates all things by virtue of his Spirit, and that according to the peculiar nature which each class of beings has received by the law of creation. But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it lest by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth" (*Inst.* II.ii.16). On this level, Calvin makes it explicit that arts and sciences manifest "a universal apprehension of reason and understanding" (II.ii.14). "If we regard the

16. *Christianisme et Philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), p. 44. Cf. the famous French discussion of "La Notion de philosophie Chrétienne," in the Séance du 21 mars 1931 (Paris: *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*).

17. T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), p. 116.



Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonour the Spirit of God' (II.ii.15). It is here also that his positive aesthetic appears, as Wencelius has shown, an aesthetic which destroys the caricature of Calvin drawn by the negative mood and puritan spirit of his successors.<sup>18</sup> Again, the "common grace" of which he speaks in this context, as well as the "special grace" granted to men of excellence, is not a question of degrees of salvation: this is not soteriology but epistemology, the validity of reason when it turns to "inferior things."

It is when the reason attempts to grasp higher reality that it quickly discovers its limits, or rather tries to deny them and so displays its ability as a factory of idols (*Inst.* II.ii.18-21). Here is the beginning of his discussion:

We must now analyse what human reason can discern with regard to God's Kingdom and to spiritual insight. This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God; (2) knowing his fatherly favour in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. In the first two points—and especially in the second—the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles! Certainly I do not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers, but these always show a certain giddy imagination. As was stated above, the Lord indeed gave them a slight taste of his divinity that they might not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance. . . . They are like a traveller passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightning flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step—let alone be directed on his way by its help. . . . Human reason, therefore, neither approaches, nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us (II.ii.18).

For Calvin, then, philosophy may indicate the universal desire for truth and the remarkable achievement in human affairs, but it is almost completely unreliable in things divine. In a notable passage he states that the evidence of God in creation does not seem to profit us: "In this regard how volubly has the whole tribe of philosophers shown their stupidity and silliness! For even though we may excuse the others (who act like utter fools), Plato, the most religious of all and the most circumspect, also vanishes in his round globe.<sup>19</sup> And what might not happen to others when the leading minds, whose task it is to light the pathway for the rest, wander and stumble!" (*Inst.* I.v.11). They "wander and stumble"—the *labyrinth* is a

18. L. Wencelius, *L'Esthétique de Calvin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1937). Calvin's concept of beauty may be gathered from *Inst.* III.x.2: "Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?" and from his sermon on 2 Samuel 14 (11 Sept., 1562) on Absalom's beauty, the use and abuse of divine gifts of body and spirit (*Supplementa Calviniana*, Vol. I (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), No. 46, pp. 399ff.). His humanism appears in his aesthetic: for instance in his evaluation of music in worship and in human life generally, he reflects the musical humanism of the Renaissance (*laus musicae*), e.g. Preface to 1543 Psalter.

19. Cf. *Timaeus*, 33B.

favourite symbol of Calvin, and even the *abyss*. Reason wanders in an "inextricable" labyrinth, "if the Word does not serve as a thread to guide our path." Only Scripture saves us "from wandering up and down as in a labyrinth, in search of some doubtful deity." Again: "All knowledge without Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts"; "All that knowledge of God which men think they have attained out of Christ will be a deadly abyss."<sup>20</sup>

Knowledge of God is knowledge of divine mystery, made actual and therefore possible through the Spirit's enlightenment. Commenting on Paul's idea of mystery, Calvin states: "Let us, however, learn from this, that the gospel can be understood by faith alone—not by reason, nor by the perspicacity of the human understanding, because otherwise it is a thing that is hid from us. . . . Hence all that think they know anything of God apart from Christ, contrive to themselves an idol in the place of God; as also, on the other hand, that man is ignorant of Christ, who is not led by him to the Father, and who does not in him embrace God wholly."<sup>21</sup> So there is a profound scepticism about reason when it thinks about God, unless it follows the Word of God, particularly the written form of Scripture, the chief datum in the leading of the Spirit. Scripture teaches "an exclusive definition" of God, which "annihilates all the divinity that men fashion for themselves out of their own opinion" (*Inst.* I.xi.1). In a telling passage Calvin writes:

Now this power which is peculiar to Scripture is clear from the fact that of human writings, however artfully polished, there is none capable of affecting us at all comparably. Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, and others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigour as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that the Sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavour, breathe something divine (*Inst.* I.viii.1).

Calvin accepts sense data as the basis of human knowledge—he would belong to the cosmological rather than ontological type of philosophy of religion, for instance, in his acceptance of the argument from design (e.g. *Inst.* I.v.2–9). But faith is interpreted as a higher and discontinuous form of knowing:

When we call faith "knowledge" we do not mean comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception. For faith is so far above sense that man's mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it. Even where the mind has attained, it does not comprehend what it feels. But while it is persuaded of what it does not grasp, by the very certainty of its persuasion it understands more than if it

20. *Inst.* I. vi. 3, I.vi.1; Comm. on 1 Peter 1:21, on John 6:46; cf. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, Chap. 11: "Natural Theology (1)."

21. Comm. on Colossians 2:2.

perceived anything human by its own capacity . . . we conclude that the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension (*Inst.* III.ii.14).

For Calvin, this idea of persuasion is the key to the knowledge of God. In this form of communication the mystery involves a new relationship beyond common comprehension. E. Dowey has stressed "the existential character of all our knowledge of God" according to Calvin.<sup>22</sup> Doumergue termed this theology "une doctrine de pratique," a suggestion which explains Calvin's impatience with "speculation." For example: "Those, therefore, who in considering this question propose to inquire what the essence of God is (*quid sit Deus*) only trifle with frigid speculations—it being much more important for us to know what kind of being (*qualis sit*) God is, and what things are agreeable to his nature" (*Inst.* I.ii.2). Thus he can praise the teachings of the philosophers as "true, not only enjoyable, but also profitable to learn, and skilfully assembled by them. And I do not forbid those who are desirous of learning to study them." But over against their "subtle" teachings, it requires only a "simple definition" for "the upbuilding of godliness" (I.xv.6).

Like Luther's *pro te*, this practical-utilitarian bent of Calvin maintains the unity of epistemology with soteriology, so that knowledge of God involves the self in conversion, the fruit of new life. Many large questions are at stake in our brief survey, but perhaps they can be indicated best if we conclude with a final question about Calvin's methodology.

### 5. CALVIN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Revelation, for Calvin, is itself an accommodation to human creatureliness and sinfulness—the interaction of both makes the human predicament complex and the divine action correspondingly hidden.<sup>23</sup> The business of theology is the analysis of this accommodated revelation, and its commendation to man. Calvin's method therefore displays two motives: faithfulness to the data of revelation, and apologetic or evangelical fervour. It is necessary to appreciate how fully Calvin accepts the theme on which the *Institutes* open: "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." This idea is familiar in Augustine, but it was actually a received definition of philosophy in the classical world, recovered by the Humanists.<sup>24</sup> Thus Book I opens with this ancient philosophical theme of the twofold nature of knowledge, while Book II opens with the motto of the Delphic oracle: "Know thyself."

22. *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), pp. 24ff.

23. Cf. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God . . .*; T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1952).

24. E.g. Cicero, *De Finibus*. Cf. Boisset, *Sagesse et Sainteté . . .*, pp. 1ff; Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin*, pp. 241ff.

Now the twofold knowledge is a distinction without separation, as Calvin said; moreover, both aspects depend on the accommodated revelatory data. Theology will be less systematic than philosophy, therefore, more like a science or a phenomenological discipline. Calvin's method suggests the truth of this conclusion—Doumergue described it as "méthode des contrariétés"; Herman Bauke's interest in the *Formgestaltung* rather than the specific content of Calvin's theology gave evidence of a *compositio oppositorum*, inharmonious elements; Peter Barth has also stressed the dialectic character of Calvin's thought.<sup>25</sup> McNeill states: "It is a superficial judgment that regards him as a resolute systematizer whose ideas are wholly unambiguous and consistent and set in a mould of flawless logic. In dogmatic exposition, says Henry Strohl, 'Calvin did not seek harmonization; he was fond of tracing a middle way between two extreme solutions.'"<sup>26</sup>

It is the grasp of Calvin's motive and method that has led Quirinus Breen to make so much of Calvin as standing within the "rhetorical tradition" of Humanism—a "dynamic Ciceronianism." After his careful analysis of Calvin's relation to the chief elements in rhetorical style and argument, he concludes: "There is a logic in the *Institutes*. In fact, it is full of logic. But the logic is not syllogistic. It is rhetorical logic. Syllogistic logic uses induction and the syllogism; rhetorical logic uses example and the enthymeme."<sup>27</sup> I submit that it is somewhat along this line that we must look for a proper understanding of John Calvin, especially his attitude towards philosophy. He stands against philosophy as metaphysical speculation about ultimate reality, and against a systematic philosophy as preamble to faith.<sup>28</sup> How modern that sounds! For indeed it is characteristic of his theology that it appreciates the "impropriety" of human language about God, that it understands the "suspense" by which revelation holds back ultimate reality so that it is present in signs and symbols, and so often hesitant and careful lest it say too much. Therefore he accepts only a critical philosophy, moving within the idea of *epoche* of his beloved Plato, and of the Stoics. (Hamann once described the thought of Socrates as forming a series of islands, with no bridges between.) Perhaps there is a similar relationship to philosophy evident in Calvin's modern disciple Karl Barth, who has declared: "We must return to the method of the *Loci*, the method of Melancthon and also of Calvin, which was wrongly set aside as unscholarly by the more progressive of the contemporaries of J. Gerhard and A. Polanus."<sup>29</sup>

Thus we should be wary of those later Calvinists who systematized their

25. Cf. the short but excellent article by John Leith, "Calvin's Theological Method and the Ambiguity in His Theology," in *Reformation Studies*, ed. F. H. Littell (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962); also the opening chapter of W. Niesel's *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956): "The Present State of Critical Studies."

26. *The History and Character of Calvinism*, p. 202.

27. "John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition," *Church History*, March 1957, p. 13.

28. Cf. Jacques de Senarclens, *Heirs of the Reformation* (translated by G. W. Bromiley, London: S.C.M., 1963), pp. 85ff., concerning the *praeambula fidei* of scholasticism and its fate in the sixteenth century.

29. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 870.

“Christian philosophy” with the help of Aristotle. The selection of the doctrine of predestination as the ordering principle of theology is symptomatic of this step. Such an analytic method misses the point of Calvin’s style, his theological form. The philosophizing of theology characteristic of “classical Calvinism,” in which a philosophical preamble returns, albeit with new content, suggests a shift from Calvin’s own style to a different understanding of theology’s task.<sup>30</sup> In this sense the last word must concern his positive relationship to the theological datum, the Gospel. Here his humanist conviction—his philosophy of persuasion—that truth will come not by proof but by invitation, not by rational comprehension but by total commitment to a style of life, comes to the fore. His speech is too broken, his theology too dynamic, to substitute for a philosophy. Philosophy is serious, a preparation for death; theology is gay, a guide for new life.

30. Cf. H. Dooyeweerd’s chapters 5–7 on “Philosophy and Theology” in *In The Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960); also the “established categories” presupposed by Leroy Nixon in *John Calvin’s Teachings on Human Reason* (New York: Exposition Press, 1963). A recent book in ecumenical mood attempts to show the common basis of medieval Catholic and seventeenth century Protestant scholasticism, and so brings significant tangential evidence to our subject: Robert P. Scharlemann: *Thomas Aquinas and John Gerhard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).