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## A Misplaced Debate on the Knowledge of God in Calvin's Thought

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### 1

The heated theological controversy between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, in which Emil Brunner wrote *Natur und Gnade* (1934) and received Karl Barth's *Nein!* (1935) in reply, was in part a controversy over the interpretation of Calvin. After the controversy, Peter Barth, Karl Barth's brother, wrote *Das Problem der natürlichen Theologie bei Calvin* (1935), and Günter Gloede, Emil Brunner's pupil, wrote *Theologia Naturalis bei Calvin* (1935). After some fifteen years, in 1952, T. H. L. Parker, Karl Barth's pupil, published *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, and Edward A. Dowey, Jr., Emil Brunner's pupil, published *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*. In this paper, we discuss the controversies and the problem of the knowledge of God in Calvin's theology.

### 2

When T. H. L. Parker published the second edition of his *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* in 1969, he wrote in "Preface" :

Until 1952, no English work on this particular subject had appeared:

then within a few months of each other were published the first edition of this book and also, in the United States, Professor E. A. Dowey's *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*.... But I think that everyone who reads the two books will agree with me that the striking fact about them lies in their disagreements. Starting from the same evidence, they reach different conclusions on one of the principal issues - the place of the "natural" knowledge of God in Calvin's thought. Is this just because Professor Dowey is a disciple of Brunner and I of Barth? I do not think so....<sup>1)</sup>

According to Dowey, the *Institutes'* "division into four books.... is as misleading as the respective lengths of the books in judging the actual subordination of the material, indeed, almost as misleading as judging the importance of political thought and action to Calvin by the place it occupies in the *Institutes*."<sup>2)</sup> He continues :

From the point of view of the knowledge of God, which is the foundation of Calvin's theological writing, Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559 contains two, not four, divisions. Further, the first and much the smaller of the two is more general and inclusive, setting the context and proposing the categories within which the latter is to be grasped. This division corresponds to what Calvin conceived of as the two kinds of revelation : the revelation of God as Creator, and as Redeemer. The short Book I of the 1559 edition represents the former, and the whole remainder of the work represents the latter.<sup>3)</sup>

Dowey divides the *Institutes*, with Köstlin, in the following way :

1. The doctrines of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, and his creation and world government in general, apart from sin and the redemptive

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1) T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh : Oliver & Boyd, 1969), Preface.

2) Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan : William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 41.

3) Ibid.

revelation and redemptive activity that sin makes necessary - and similarly of mankind, apart from sin and the necessity for salvation. (Book I).

2. The historical revelation and activity of God for the salvation of the sinner, as follows :
  - a. The establishing of salvation through the incarnate Son, for which preparation had already been made under the Old Covenant. (Book I).
  - b. The application through the Holy Spirit of the salvation given in Christ, as follows :
    - (1) The process of salvation which is realized inwardly by the Spirit in individuals, extending until the perfection of these persons in the resurrection. (Book II).
    - (2) The outer means which God uses in this activity of the Spirit. (Book IV).<sup>4)</sup>

He continues to say, "I wish to maintain with Köstlin, although in greater detail and with more emphasis upon its importance, what was clear to me before consulting Köstlin : that the really significant ordering principle of the *Institutes* in the 1559 edition is the *duplex cognitio Domini*, not the Apostles' Creed."<sup>5)</sup>

At this point Parker's criticism of Dowey begins. He says :

At this point it is necessary to try to establish the significance of the form of the 1559 edition, in opposition to Köstlin, who, dividing the *Institutio* into two parts instead of four, Book I on the knowledge of God the Creator, and Books II-IV on the knowledge of God the Redeemer, interpreted the whole work as a treatment of the *duplex cognitio Dei*. In recent times, E. A. Dowey has agreed with Köstlin in making this division and has used it as a major part of the foundation of his interpretation of Calvin.<sup>6)</sup>

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4) *Ibid.*, p. 42.

5) *Ibid.*

6) Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 5.

Parker continues to say :

We are here concerned with the problem of the difference between genuine and illegitimate textual criticism. It is illegitimate textual criticism to amend a passage or the order of passages against the author's avowed or known intention. We may disagree with that intention, but we cannot now change it .... In his [Calvin's] "Preface to the Reader" he reviews the progress of the work: "In the first edition of this work of mine I treated the subject for the most part rather sketchily...." "... I was never satisfied until I had arranged it in its present order ...." Calvin was satisfied at last with the forms of the *Institutio*; that is to say, he was satisfied that the form now corresponded to and expressed the truth of the subject with which he was dealing. Therefore, although there is nothing (save, perhaps, theological taste) to prevent us criticising the form as clumsy or inadequate, we are not at liberty to change it into another form altogether and then discuss the result as if we were still discussing Calvin.

The four-fold ordering of the Apostles' Creed, which Calvin uses as the framework of the book, need cause us no embarrassment.<sup>7)</sup>

When Parker argues that Calvin's *Institutes* has its four divisions, not two divisions, we cannot criticize him. However, cannot we criticize him if he argues that we are not at liberty to change the form into another form? Cannot we divide or combine some chapters of a book in order to understand its contents better? It seems to us that it is not illegitimate to divide or to combine some chapters of a book in order to understand its contents better. We do not argue that Dowe's two divisions of *Institutes* are correct, and that Parker's four divisions are incorrect, but argue that it is not illegitimate to combine some books of *Institutes* in order to understand its contents better.

In fact, Parker's criticism of Dowe does not stop here. His main criticism of Dowe is about his *duplex cognitio Dei*. He says :

Professor Dowe, of course, like Köstlin before him, is well aware that

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7) Ibid., pp. 5-6.

the 1559 *Institutio* corresponds to the four-fold division of the Creed, and he can speak of 'the excellence and even beauty of Calvin's final arrangement in terms of the Creed.' (We may note in passing that if his interpretation of the *Institutio* as a dissertation on the two-fold knowledge of God is correct, then this piece of praise is out of place, for the *Institutio* would be a badly arranged book in that it is forced into a form alien to its content. If the *duplex cognitio Dei* is the real subject, a two-fold arrangement would have been better.) He re-arranges the *Institutio* because he regards it as a statement and exposition of the *duplex cognitio Dei*, that is of the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer ....<sup>8)</sup>

Parker argues, "The knowledge of God demands a further methodological distinction: a distinction is made between the knowledge of God as the Creator and the knowledge of God as the Redeemer. These are not two knowledges, of course, or we should be forced to say that there were two objects and so divorce the Creator from the Redeemer. It is one knowledge with one object, but with the one object contemplated from two sides."<sup>9)</sup> Why does Parker criticize Dowey's *duplex cognitio Domini*? Because it seems to Parker that the *duplex cognitio Domini* gives a place to the "natural" knowledge of God in Calvin's thought. "Starting from the same evidence, they [books of Parker and Dowey] reach different conclusions on one of the principal issues - the place of the 'natural' knowledge of God in Calvin's thought. Is this just because Professor Dowey is a disciple of Brunner and I of Barth?"<sup>10)</sup> Again Parker says, "'Canst thou by searching find out God?' demanded Zophar the Naamathite of stricken Job. To this question the answers, although many and various, have of necessity been fundamentally *Yes* or *No*, uttered with degrees of conviction and intensity. Theism has *Yes*, from a belief in a capability of man for the

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8) *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

9) *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

10) *Above*, p. 1.

divine. But this reply could never satisfy the Christian Church ; for if man can find out God, what need of the revelation in Jesus Christ and of the illumination of the Holy Spirit? Hence the reply of the Christian theologian has always been a more or less definite *No*, from the hesitant *No, but ...* of liberal Protestantism to the *Nein* that thundered out of Basel in the year 1934."<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, when Dowey published the second printing of his *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* in 1964, he said in "Preface to the Second Printing" :

The polemic of T. H. L. Parker in an Appendix to the American reprint of his book (1959) misses the mark. The claim that problems of the *duplex cognitio Domini* arises from my "rearranging" of the *Institutes* is made so irresponsibly as to cast doubts on Parker's desire to be taken seriously .... But I fail to see the difference between his summary on page 125 and my own expressed view. A glance at Mr. Parker's bibliography and text reveals a second-hand acquaintance with the continental debates from which his own case (and mine) derives. He might profit from the brief account, *infra*, Appendix III.<sup>12</sup>

In Appendix, Dowey deals with "the Barth-Brunner controversy on Calvin." "The heated theological controversy of fifteen years ago, in which Emil Brunner wrote *Nature and Grace* and received Karl Barth's *No* in his reply, was in part a controversy over the interpretation of Calvin."<sup>13</sup> According to Dowey, "Neither side used Calvin's own basic distinction, the *duplex cognitio Domini*, properly."<sup>14</sup> The problem was formulated in terms of the revelation 'from creation and in Christ,' which is Barth's reading of the Calvin phrase, and which Brunner uses, although without attributing it to Calvin."<sup>15</sup> "This statement

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11) Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 1.

12) Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, pp. xv-xvi.

13) *Ibid.*, p. 265.

14) *Ibid.*

embraces two problems : that of the means of obtaining the knowledge of God (which according to Calvin are creation and Scripture) and that of the 'species' of knowledge of Christ the Redeemer."<sup>16</sup> "The result of this formulation was that the specific problem of relating I. i-v (Calvin's natural theology over which he cast Paul's Biblical verdict, 'inexcusable') to I. x-xviii (the Bible's teaching about the Creator) was confused with the problem of relating I. x-xviii (the Bible's teaching about the Creator) to Books II-IV (the Bible's teaching about the Redeemer)."<sup>17</sup> "Hence developed Barth's suspicion that Brunner was trying to make of I. i-v an unrefracted piece of natural theology, when Brunner was simply defending the Biblical doctrine of the revelation of the Creator (I. x ff.) in so far as the Bible itself, according to Calvin, points to creation as God's revelation. Barth's attack is centered largely on I. v, although Brunner cites from it only twice in *Nature and Grace*, even in the second edition."<sup>18</sup> According to Dowey, "Brunner attributed to Calvin a '*Christian theologia naturalis*.' By this term he meant a natural theology in an objective sense (the revelation in creation), but not in the Roman Catholic subjective sense (the ability to receive the revelation in creation unaided by Scripture)."<sup>19</sup>

### 3

Emil Brunner, in his book *Nature and Grace*, says, in Calvin "(t)he theological importance of the concept of nature is shown by the fact that God can be known from nature. And this is not a confused

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15) Ibid.

16) Ibid.

17) Ibid.

18) Ibid.

19) Ibid., p. 266.



knowledge, which can hardly be of interest for the Christian, who knows the Word of God. On the contrary, it is something highly important and necessary for the Christian as well. God demands of us that we should know and honour him in his works."<sup>20)</sup> Brunner continues to say :

He [God] has set us into this "theatre" of his glory in order that in it we should know, contemplate and honour him as the Lord of glory. God can be known from nature other than man, but also from man himself. Indeed, he is to be known especially from the latter. But above all from *experientia*, i.e. from the experience of his preserving and providential grace. This *experientia* = knowledge of God is not made superfluous by faith in the Word of God, but on the contrary remains an important complement of the knowledge of God derived from Scripture.<sup>21)</sup>

But, according to Brunner, in Calvin "the knowledge of God to be gained from nature is only partial. To put it metaphorically : from nature we know the hands and feet but not the heart of God." That is to say, "We can know his wisdom and omnipotence, also his justice and even his goodness, but not his forgiving mercy, his absolute will to bring about a communion between man and himself."<sup>22)</sup> "But this imperfection of the natural knowledge of God is no reason for underestimating it. Not even he who has been taught by the Word of God can dispense with it and is bound to acknowledge it. Moreover, he is greatly assisted by it."<sup>23)</sup> Brunner explains the relation of revelation in Scripture to that in nature in Calvin's theology as follows :

The relation of revelation in Scripture to that in nature is, however, not

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20) Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace." *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London : The Centenary Press, 1946), p. 38.

21) Ibid.

22) Ibid.

23) Ibid., pp. 38-39.

simple but twofold: through Scripture the revelation in nature is both clarified and complemented. Scripture serves as a "lens", *i.e.* as a magnifying-glass for natural revelation. Another image: through the revelation in Scripture the voice of God in natural revelation is so much amplified that sleeping man must hear it, whereas otherwise he would fail to do so. And secondly, Scripture shows us the heart of God, which is not revealed in natural revelation - at least not in its innermost secrets. But scriptural revelation does not make the natural superfluous. On the contrary: only through Scripture is the latter made effective and only by Scripture are we properly led to it.<sup>24)</sup>

On the other hand, according to Karl Barth, "It is true that, according to Calvin, the knowledge of God in Christ includes a real knowledge of the true God in creation. Includes! This means that it does not, as Brunner seems to think, bring forth a second, relatively independent kind of knowledge, so that the circle would become an ellips(e) after all - as if our reason, once it had been illumined, had of itself (*per se*) gained the power of sight (*Instit.*, II, ii, 25)!"<sup>25)</sup> Barth continues to say, "Calvin says: 'Christ is the *imago* in which God makes manifest to us not only his heart but also his hands and his feet.'<sup>26)</sup> However, Barth misunderstands Calvin's *duplex cognitio Domini*, when he says, "It is true that Calvin spoke of a *Duplex cognitio Domini*, from creation and in Christ (cf., *e.g.*, *Inst.*, I, ii, 1; Conf. Gal., 1559, Art. 2)."<sup>27)</sup> Because Calvin says, in his *Institutes* 1. 2. 1 :

First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ (cf. II Cor. 4:6) he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge of God we shall now discuss

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24) *Ibid.*, p. 39

25) Karl Barth, "No," *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary Press, 1946), pp. 108-109.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 109.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

the first aspect : the second will be dealt with in its proper place.

In short, Calvin's *duplex cognitio Domini* is not "from creation and in Christ," but the knowledge of God as Creator and God as Redeemer, that is to say, the knowledge of triune God as Creator and triune God as Redeemer. Also Barth says, "The possibility of a real knowledge by natural man of the true God, derived from creation, is according to Calvin, a possibility in principle, but not in fact, not a possibility to be realised by us. One might call it an objective possibility, created by God, but not a subjective possibility, open to man. Between what is possible in principle and what is possible in fact there inexorably lies the fall. Hence this possibility can only be discussed hypothetically : *si integer stetisset Adam (Inst., I, ii, 1).*"<sup>28)</sup>

#### 4

It seems to us that Dowey supports Emil Brunner, as Parker says, "Is this just because Professor Dowey is a disciple of Brunner and I of Barth?" Why, then, do the controversies, that is, the Barth-Brunner controversy and the Parker-Dowey controversy, come about, when they interpret the same author, Calvin? It seems to us that the cause of the controversies is in the interpretation of the word *cognitio*. Calvin says in the *Institutes*. 1.2.1 :

Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety. Here I do not yet touch upon the sort of knowledge with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend

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28) Ibid., p. 106.

God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator: but I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright. In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us. Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings - and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ. First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ (cf. II Cor. 4. 6) he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge of God we shall now discuss the first aspect: the second will be dealt with in its proper place.

In short, if Adam had remained upright, the very order of nature would have led us to the primal and simple knowledge of God. However, in this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us. It seems to us that the problem is in the interpretation of the next sentences. "it is one thing to feel that God as our Maker...." "First, ... in the fashioning of the universe... the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator." It seems to us that the questions of Barth and Parker are whether Calvin says or not that we can know God as Creator without Scripture and Holy Spirit. We need to quote more sentences from the *Institutes* in order to solve this problem. Calvin says, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy ... men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker...." (1.3.1). However, he continues, "As experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens - much less shows fruit in season (cf. Ps. 1. 3). Besides while some may evaporate in their own

superstitions and others deliberately and wickedly desert God, yet all degenerate from the true knowledge of him" (1.4.1). The answer is clear: all fall away from the true knowledge of God. That is to say, Calvin does not say that we can truly know God without Scripture and Holy Spirit. Therefore, Barth and Parker are correct. However, Calvin does say, "... in the fashioning of the universe ... the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator ... the resulting twofold knowledge of God ..." (1.2.1). It seems to us that, as we said, the cause of the controversies is in the interpretation of the word *cognitio*. We can find several meanings of the word *cognitio* in a lexicon: acquiring of knowledge, knowledge, idea, notion, etc. It seems to us that Barth and Parker interpret *cognitio* as acquiring of knowledge and Brunner and Dowey as knowledge. We can know true God only by Scripture and Holy Spirit: but there is knowledge of true God in creation and Scripture; and so those who are illuminated by Scripture and Holy Spirit can obtain the knowledge of true God in creation. Therefore, we would like to call the controversy a misplaced debate.