

**JOHN CALVIN ON
THE DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE**

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John Calvin on the Doctrine of Assurance

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"Puritanism as a Movement of Revival", chap.3, pp.35-48.

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Foreword/序言

我們蒙恩時都算是更正教基督徒，但它的究竟除非我們真正明白了宗教改革，尤其是它的第三波、即日內瓦改革宗運動，我們很難知曉它的涵義。1983年四月我們家搬到美國紐澤西州普林斯頓一帶，我也在鎮上的華人教會開始獨當一面的牧會事奉。

當時我已全時間服事主四年半了。我一到紐澤西州就認識了于慕潔弟兄(後來在若歌教會長老)，兩人一見如故，他規勸我以真言，「你應當趕緊進入神學院好好把自己洗一洗。」這正是他當日使用的言語。洗什麼？因為那四年半我在小群背景的教會團體服事，人雖然離開了，但仍有不少的屬靈觀念在我的思想內，需要用主的道將自己好好地整頓一番。由於地緣，我就申請了西敏士神學院。兩年讀完MAR (1983~1985)。1985年秋我讀了洛鐘師(或譯鐘馬田 Martyn Llyod-Jones)所寫的不可言喻的喜樂(*Joy Unspeakable*, 1984)，十分喜歡。這是一本介紹清教徒靈修神學的書。於是有意願讀神學碩士，專研清教徒運動。Dr. D. Clair Davis 樂意收我做碩士生，於是我就開始專攻清教徒研究。

這篇論文是神碩的論文，自然我的目的是要寫清教徒論救恩的確據。當我寫完第一章時，我去找教授談我的困難：「我才寫到加爾文論確據，就發覺資料太多，足夠我寫完這篇論文。是否我就專心寫加爾文就可以了。清教徒者留待日後再寫。」他點頭，「你這樣研究的方向與步調是對的。」

寫這篇論文等於走入加爾文這位千年不一出的神學大師的心

思之內，親炙於他的屬靈之豐富。研究的過程有如一餐又一餐的饗宴，我將結果都記錄在論文裏了。加爾文將聖奧古斯丁的恩典論，推向了另一個高峰，其關鍵是他將新約裏的一個重要的教義－聖靈的見證－發掘出來了；它像一個屬靈的連結器，將聖經無誤論、靈與道的雙重結構、信心、救恩的確據等教義，自然地黏合起來，一方面給聖靈鋪了軌道，讓祂可以藉著聖道自由強力地運行其上，另一方面它將救恩的次序裏精采，像戲劇一般地一齣又一齣地推上救恩的舞台，又像金索，將重生、信心、成聖、兒子的名份、救恩的確據等一一串出。

這篇論文的材料主要是加爾文的作品：基督教要義、聖經註釋等，這些材料也正是爾後一百年英國清教徒運動主要的動力。希望您也可以感受到聖靈在我們心中引起的共振。

張麟至牧師 2022/1/16. Suwanee, Georgia, U.S.A.

Introduction

JOHN CALVIN ON ASSURANCE

To elucidate the implications of and to unravel the controversies in the Reformed doctrine of assurance, we should at least go back to John Calvin (1509~1564), if not other magisterial Reformers. We cannot deny that there are differences between Calvin and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1643~1646) at face value.¹ The apparent difference lies in that Calvin consistently averred that assurance is the essence of faith while the *WCF* claimed otherwise: “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long ... before he be partaker of it ..., yet ... he may ... attain thereunto.”² And the Larger Catechism prepared one year later also confirmed the stance of the *WCF*:

Q.81. Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the estate of grace, and that they shall be saved?

¹ Hereafter it is abbreviated as the *WCF* and the following two figures represent its chapter and section. The *WCF* was completed on December 3, 1646 and supplemented with the Scripture proofs on April 29, 1647. See *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (the Committee for Christian Education & Publications: Atlanta, GA), xvi.

² *WCF* 18:3.

A81: Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith, true believers may wait long before they obtain it³

While they differ at face value, Calvin and the *WCF* are congenial to each other at many essential points; in fact, the *WCF* digested many theological insights of Calvin as well as developed its own distinctions. Their differences involve many other theological issues and demand more in-depth research to locate the real organic relationship between assurance and faith.

Since the controversy arose in Reformed scholarship, many theories have been proposed to solve or to interpret it. Joel R. Beeke divides them into two schools,⁴ namely the Cunningham-MacLeod school and the Kendall school.⁵ The former one does “mildly fault the Reformers for allowing ... reasons blind them to a thorough fleshing out of the doctrine of assurance in its relationship to saving faith” Hence they think that the doctrine of assurance of the *WCF* is a *qualitative improvement* on the Reformers.⁶ But according to Kendall

Theodore Beza and William Perkins are regarded as the culprits

³ The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards. Hereafter it is abbreviated as LC and the following figure represents its order of questions. The LC was completed on April 14, 1648. See *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (the Committee for Christian Education & Publications: Atlanta, GA), xvi.

⁴ Joel R. Beeke, *Personal Assurance of Faith: English Puritanism and the Dutch “Nadere Reformatie”*: From Westminster to Alexander Comrie (1640-1760). Ph.D. dissertation of Westminster Theological Seminary, Phil., 1988. 22-26.

⁵ To this school Beeke adds 18 notable Reformed scholars to its list; see his work note 1 on p. 2. Here I will add some others with Kendall himself in chronological order: W. H. Chalker (1961), Kendall (1976), A. N. S. Lane (1979), and M. Charles Bell (1985).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

who packed and pushed respectively the Post-Reformation doctrine of assurance down the slope of experimental subjectivity until it snowballed into Westminster's despicable betrayal of Calvinism"⁷

Therefore the doctrine of assurance of the *WCF*, for Kendall, is a *qualitative*⁸ and *dichotomous*⁹ departure from Calvin. Beeke's judgment upon these two schools is as follows: "The theories of fundamental discrepancy (Kendall et al.) or of less fundamental, yet qualitative discrepancy (Cunningham et al.), are both erroneous."¹⁰ So he proposes his own theory that "the discrepancy between Calvin and Calvinism on faith and assurance was largely *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*."¹¹ Now there are three schools: fundamental discrepancy, qualitative discrepancy and quantitative discrepancy. Which one is the correct one? Or is there a need for another theory?

⁷ Kendall, "Puritan Modification," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* ed. by Reid W. Stanford, 214. Also quoted by Beeke, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26. But Beeke also concedes that both "contain elements of truth," however, neither group has reached the heart of the issue. 25-26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26. Probably the theory of David Lachman and Robert W. A. Letham can be added to the school of Beeke. Lachman comments, the Reformers and the *WCF* were different ways of talking about assurance, and at the bottom they were essentially the same. See Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 1973, 176-177; quoted in Letham, 48-49. Letham stresses that there is an organic and integral relationship between assurance and faith. See Letham, *The Relationship Between Saving Faith and Assurance of Salvation*, 50. After pointing out that "there is a distinct possibility that *consciousness* of assurance may not always be present for believers," he concludes that "assurance of salvation is a normal--because Biblically normative--but not necessarily invariable ingredient or constituent element of saving faith." See 243.

In my research I find that the answer lies in examining Calvin's doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Calvin's doctrine of assurance is a natural fruit of his doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The latter doctrine is a major theological contribution of Calvin, an invincible weapon for him in his day to meet the challenges of his opponents and still a precious legacy for us today. It also serves as the epistemology for Calvin's grand systematic theology. Therefore, we must examine the theological structure in Calvin's mind, as exhibited in his *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, to understand the structural implication of assurance in his whole system.

Starting from election, the spring of salvation (chapter 1), I assert that for Calvin, assurance is the essence of faith (chapter 2 and 3). Then I explore assurance from the perspective of the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit (chapters 4 through 6). I also discuss the *sylogismus practicus* (chapter 7) to complete Calvin's doctrine of assurance. In the *Conclusion* I compare the *WCF* with Calvin not by considering their terminologies merely at face value, but by examining their intrinsic theologies.

Therefore I conclude that the *WCF* indeed incorporated Calvin's doctrine of assurance and maintained his original spirit--even in phraseology--with the exception of nonessential modifications which arose out of the pastoral concern.¹² In other words, my conclusion converges with Beeke's proposal that the discrepancy between them was

¹² Cf. B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," 1909, in *Calvin and Augustine* (Presbyterian and Reformed: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1980), 126. He says that the *WCF* is the best and most balanced statement of Calvin's doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. I extend his judgment to the doctrine of assurance.

Introduction--John Calvin on Assurance

“largely *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*.”¹³ The apparent difference can be harmonized understandably and satisfactorily.

¹³ Beeke, 26.

Chapter 1

ELECTION AND ASSURANCE

The very doctrine which Calvin felt reluctant to present, yet which took priority in his theology of sovereign grace, is election. The reluctance, nevertheless, derives not from his reservation or hesitation about it, but from his conviction of how to approach it. John H. Leith grasps its concern:

Calvin approached the doctrine of predestination from the viewpoint of practical Christianity. ... His point of departure was not the doctrine of God but the practical problems involved in the existence of the church. Thus, whatever may be the current status of the problem, predestination for Calvin was intimately tied up with the everyday experience of Christian faith.¹

So he delayed its expositions until Book three of his Institute. And he even delayed it until the last chapters (Chapters 21-24), only preceding the final chapter on resurrection--our future hope. For he knew that,

There is not a more effectual means of building up faith than giv-

¹ John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1989), 120.

ing our open ears to the election of God, which the Holy Spirit seals upon our heart while we hear For our salvation is then sure to us, when we find the cause of it in the breast of God.²

Therefore after the doctrine of the Christian life, he led his readers up into the bosom of God.

But we will first investigate Calvin's views on assurance in relation to election. For assurance of faith, though experienced in our everyday life, is both defined by and derived from election.

Christ, the Mirror of Election

For Calvin, assurance is registered in the person of Christ as much as election is secured in Him too. He interprets Paul's teaching of Eph. 1:4a in this way:

He [Paul] takes away all consideration of real worth on our part ... since among all the offspring of Adam, the Heavenly Father found nothing worthy of his election, he turns his eyes upon his Anointed, to choose from that body as members those whom he was to take into the fellowship.³

Hence nobody was elected by God except "the seed of David ..., [who was] not made Son of God by righteous living but was freely given such honor so that he might afterward share his gifts with *others*." So

² CR 8:260, *On Eternal Predestination*, quoted in Leith, 120-121. In the passage Calvin points out the fruits of this doctrine: (1) building up a sound faith, (2) training us to humility, (3) lifting us to admire God.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1960), 2: 933. Or Bk. III, Ch. XXII, Section 1. (Hereafter 3.22.1 will be designated.)

Calvin, quoting Augustine, proclaims that “we have in the very Head of the church the clearest *mirror of election*”⁴ Just as our election is through our union with Christ, so also our assurance is *Christ-directed* and *Christ-centered*. Over and over again he returns to this point.⁵ He testifies that “If ... you contemplate Christ, there is sure salvation; if you turn back to yourself, there is sure damnation.”⁶ This is the foundation of the objective truth, as well as of the subjective experience of the doctrine of assurance.

The Experiential Path

Are we allowed then to penetrate “the sacred precincts of divine wisdom” of predestination to know our salvation?⁷ Human curiosity, Calvin warns, will lead us into a “labyrinth ... no exit,” or “a dangerous sea,” or even the “deep abyss” which “will swallow us up.”⁸ For human reason cannot search the inscrutable depth of God’s wisdom!⁹ He comments similarly in the *Commentaries*. Those who seek their salvation in the labyrinth of predestination are, in his opinion mad and sacrilegious.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid. [italics mine]; see also 3.24.5; 3.21.7.

⁵ Eg. *Inst.* 3.22.6: “salvation in *himself* alone, why do you descend to yourself? ... your own merits? ... your own works?” 3.22.7: “the intrinsic cause of this [adoption] is in *himself* for he is content with his own secret good pleasure.” [Italics mine]

⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.24.

⁷ *Inst.* 3.21.1.

⁸ *Inst.* 3.21.1; 3.24.4; 3.24.3; see also 3.24.4: “... engulf themselves in a deadly abyss”; and 3.2.35: “It is an abyss, the depth of the cross.”

⁹ Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.5.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John, Part One (Chapter 1-10)*, 1553

But on the other hand, Calvin indicates, “predestination, *rightly understood*, brings no shaking of faith, but rather its *best confirmation*.”¹¹ And moreover he adds, “We shall *never* be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy *until we come to know his eternal election*.”¹² How is election “rightly understood”? Not by reason, but by the Word of God, “just as those engulf themselves in a deadly abyss ... *apart from his Word*, so those who rightly and duly examine it as it is contained in his *Word* reap the inestimable fruit of comfort.”¹³ Calvin abides with the guidance of the Word and continues to say that, “to begin with God’s call, and to end with it” will be “the way of our inquiry.” Here we see Calvin set an *experiential* path to attain the assurance of election. R. T. Kendall briefly summarized the Westminster theology as predestinarian, voluntaristic, and experimental.¹⁴ The first and the third distinctions are Calvinistic despite their nuances. It is Calvin who sowed the seed of Reformed Pietism by indicating *the experiential* approach within the tension of the system of double predestination. He asserts the *best order* by saying that “we shall be following the *best*

[Latin], translated by T. H. L. Parker, 1958, vol. 4 of *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1988). on John 6:40, 162, vol.4. Hereafter all quotations of the English translations of *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* are quoted from those of Eerdmans, and abbreviated as Calvin’s *Comm.* on book chapter: verse(s), page(s), volume. See also Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 11:33f, 259-261, vol. 8; 2 Thess 2:13, 408-410, vol. 8; 1Pet 1:2, 229-230, vol. 12, etc.

¹¹ *Inst.* 3.24.9. [italics mine]

¹² *Inst.* 3.21.1. [italics mine]

¹³ *Inst.* 3.24.4. [italics mine]

¹⁴ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: New York, 1979), 198.

order if, in seeking the certainty of our election, we cling to those *latter signs* which are sure attestations of it.”¹⁵ The *best order* is to seek the assurance of election through the *latter signs* in the realm of Word-regulated experience.

The Latter Signs

From its context the sign(s) could be faith, calling and/or peace.¹⁶ Wilhelm Niesel also comments on this *signa posteriora* (latter signs):

What does he [Calvin] mean by this? ... By this he means not our attitude or our works ... but God’s “objective Word,” “His calling” which means in the last resort, Christ, whom we encounter in the Word in the virtue of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Gordon J. Keddie also shows his interest in it. He concedes that Calvin “does not appear to expound these *signs* in any detail, as do ... the Puritans,” but “the experiences of being transformed into the state of grace, and continuing in it, constitute the *latter signs*”.¹⁸

Not only did he instruct the anxious soul to “cling to those latter signs,” but Calvin also encourages them to “climb higher”:

But when God has made plain his ordination to us, we must

¹⁵ *Inst.* 3.24.4.

¹⁶ *Inst.* 3.24.3, see the section title; 3.24.4. Also see entries in other chapters, eg. 3.21.7, see its summary: justification and sanctification are signs; 3.21.5, sanctification, not merits, but marks.

¹⁷ Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (1938), trans. by H. Knight (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1956), 170-171.

¹⁸ Gordon J. Keddie, “Unfallible Certainty of the Pardon of Sin and Life Everlasting,” *EvQ* 48 (Oct-Dec 1976): 232.

climb higher, lest the effect overwhelm the cause. For when Scripture teaches that we are illumined according as God has chosen us , what is more absurd and unworthy than for our eyes to be so dazzled by the brilliance of the light as to refuse to be mindful of election?¹⁹

Here the “effect” is our faith, one of the “latter signs,” while the “cause” is God’s election. Hence assurance of salvation has to be that of election. They are but one thing. Here Niesel has a good comment: “Calvin considers that the assurance of salvation only becomes real and effective as assurance of election.”²⁰

Climbing Higher

Seeking assurance cannot stop at the “latter signs” themselves. The absurdity and unworthiness of being dazzled in our own experience, Calvin warns, is no better, if not even worse, than the audacity and presumption of penetrating into God’s secret decree. So those who seek assurance, after having the signs, should “climb higher.” In another place he clearly states:

We must, in other that election may be effectual and truly enduring, ascend to the Head, in whom the Heavenly Father has gathered his elect together, and has joined them to himself by indissoluble bond.²¹

He implies that, firstly, believers must not overwhelm themselves with the signs; secondly, do give “its due honor to the fountain” which is

¹⁹ *Inst.* 3.24.3.

²⁰ Niesel, 169.

²¹ *Inst.* 3.21.7.

God.²²

In summary, for Calvin, the experiential path to seeking assurance must have two parts: first “descend lower” to your heart in search of the signs, then “climb higher” to God in honor of Him alone. And in either part its center is always Christ alone, no matter whether He is the indwelling One or the enthroned One. Calvin exclaims, “Christ is more than a thousand testimonies to me.”²³

²² *Inst.* 3.24.3.

²³ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, translated by Calvin Translation Society (1961), 130. Quoted from Kendall's work, 28.

Chapter 2

FAITH AND ASSURANCE

The distinction, as well as the relation, between faith and assurance is the crux of the Reformed controversy of assurance. In the *WCF* the chapter on saving faith (XIV) and that on assurance (XVIII) are separated. It is stated in *WCF* 18:3 that “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the *essence* of faith” The wording of “not so” is not a square “not” and hence seemingly leaves some cushion in this tension. But the impression in its readers’ minds is a “not.” The Q/A. 81 of the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standard reinforces this impression.¹ What is Calvin’s view on this issue? Is assurance, according to Calvin, the essence of faith? What is his perception about their relation? Fortunately there are many entries in Calvin’s *Institutes*, *Commentaries*, treatises and correspondence in which he expounds the doctrine of assurance from the Scripture and tries to convince his readers and his opponents, that it is a crucial biblical truth. Over and over again he argues that the Christian faith is not just a moral conjecture or rational uncertainty, but instead joyful assurance

¹ The answer to Q.81 of LC reads, “Assurance of grace and salvation *not* being of the essence of faith”

of eternal salvation in Christ.²

The Synonymy of Faith and Assurance

Chapter two of Book Three of the *Institutes* is an exposition of the faith-assurance parity. These two terms are intertwined by Calvin to describe how the elect are endowed with salvation in Christ. He scarcely discusses the doctrine of assurance independently, but he almost always relates it to faith and election. Concerning faith Calvin writes,

Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the term commonly employed to express his power and working are, in large measure, referred to it because by faith alone he leads us into the light of gospel³

Here the term “faith” is “in large measure” used to describe the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as we discover, from the exposition of faith in the *Institutes*, faith comprehends assurance as an integral part of it. Assurance, however, sometimes is distinguished from faith that Calvin can say that, when “faith is tossed about by various doubts, ... assurance alone nourishes and protects faith.”⁴ While contending that “Calvin allowed no dichotomy between saving faith and the assurance or confidence ...”, A. N. S. Lane concedes that “Confidence can be *distinguished* from faith in that it fluctuates according to the degree of faith but it will always be found in some measure where

² Cf. Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 5:2, 105, vol. 8.

³ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.37, *init*

there is true faith.”⁵ But in most cases faith and assurance are used interchangeably. Warfield observes:

Calvin speaks of it in all the synonyms of “saving faith.” He calls it “true faith”(1.7.5), “sound faith” (1.7.4), “firm faith”(1.8.13), “the faith of the pious” (1.7.3), “the certainty of the pious”(1.7.4), “the assurance which is essential to true piety”(1.7.4), “saving knowledge” (1.8.13), “a solid assurance of eternal life” (1.7.1) It is the thing which is naturally described by this synonymy which Calvin declares is not produced in the soul except by the testimony of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Warfield ascribes the synonymy of faith and assurance to their common source, the inner “testimony of the Holy Spirit.” R. T. Kendall has a similar observation:

Calvin notes some biblical synonyms for faith ... such as “recognition” (*agnitio*) and “knowledge” (*scientia*). He describes faith as illumination (*illuminatio*), ... certainty (*certitudo*), a firm conviction (*solida persuasio*), assurance (*securitas*), firm assurance (*solida securitas*), and full assurance (*plena securitas*).⁷

He concludes, “When Calvin uses the word faith he means assurance of saving faith. ... The later distinction between faith and assurance seems never to have entered Calvin’s mind.”⁸ Compared with

⁵ A. N. S. Lane, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance,” *Vox Evangelica* XI(79) 32.

⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Presbyterian and Reformed: Phil. 1956), 76.

⁷ Kendall, 19. He quotes the terms from *Inst.* 3.2.14; 3.1.4; 3.2.2; 3.2.6; 3.2.16; 3.2.22.

⁸ Kendall, 24-25.

Warfield and Lane, Kendall does not notice in Calvin that the synonymy of faith and assurance is ascribed to their common source and that the synonymy does not exclude the distinction between them. With these observations mentioned above in mind, some conflicts in the doctrine of assurance between Calvin and the Puritans can still be resolved, or more fully harmonized, though both sides had their distinctive lexical usages, hermeneutical implications and theological emphases.

Assurance, the Essence of Faith

According to Calvin assurance must be the essence of faith, no matter whether or how a believer feels it. Assurance is an indispensable ingredient of saving faith. Early in Chapter two, his exposition of faith in the *Institutes*, Calvin asserts that “the Heavenly Father ... willed to help us; if, indeed, with *firm faith* we embrace this mercy and rest in it with steadfast hope.” Since “mere opinion” or “common assent to the gospel history” cannot bring “so great a thing to pass,” he argues, “Christ must become our intermediary,” for “God dwells in inaccessible light.” Calvin concludes, “All its [faith’s] stability rests in Christ” only because He is both God and man--”as God he is the destination to which we move; as man, the path by which we go. Both are found in Christ alone.”⁹ The reason why saving faith must be a certain faith including assurance is simply because it is a gift and work of the Triune God: flowing from the spring of the eternal decree in the election of the Father,¹⁰ resting upon the person of Christ and His ac-

⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.1.

¹⁰ See *Chapter One*, ELECTION AND ASSURANCE, 6-7.

complished redemptive work¹¹ and being confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit. Approaching the true character of faith from the divine side at first, inevitably Calvin finds that faith has assurance as its essence. This is true in his mind even when faith is overwhelmed in the crisis of doubt and darkness. Note his well-known definition of full faith:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.¹²

It is obvious that if certainty is removed, then faith is no longer faith. That assurance is the essence of faith consists only in the fact that it is the natural and necessary result of the work of the Holy Spirit. When he said "faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit," Calvin implies that the most critical key to explore the complication of the faith-assurance parity lies in the doctrine of the *testimonium spiritus sancti* (the testimony of the Holy Spirit.)¹³ While faith is the work of the trin-

¹¹ Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.6.

¹² *Inst.* 3.2.7. Cf. Article 11, "Faith," of *The Geneva Confession*:

We confess that the entrance which we have to the great treasures and riches of the goodness of God that is vouchsafed to us if by faith; inasmuch as, in certain confidence and assurance of heart, we believe in the promises of the Gospel, and receive Jesus Christ as he is offered to us by the Father and described to us by the Word of God.

Calvin: Theological Treatises, 29. Also see his similar definition of faith in *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545), *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³ Hereafter the term: "the testimony of the Holy Spirit" will be abbreviated as *testimonium*.

itarian God, however, its immediate and direct author-agent is specifically the Holy Spirit. Hence to study the mystery of faith we must first study the specific work of the Holy Spirit, the *testimonium*. According to Warfield “Calvin had no predecessors in the formulation of the doctrine.”¹⁴ (We will study it separately in detail in chapters 4-6.)

For Calvin, though our heart and mind are deeply involved in the experience of faith, the certainty of our salvation lies not in anything in ourselves, but in the infallible work of the Spirit. He asserts, “Consequently, understanding mixed with doubt is to be excluded, as it is not in firm agreement, but in conflict, with itself.”¹⁵ He does not hold that assurance emerges only after all doubts are excluded. But he does argue that a man of faith must be characterized by a certain and personal knowledge of God and of His salvation. This newly acquired knowledge which is involved in the restored image of God must be free from doubt, while his old flesh is still imbued with unbelief and doubt.

At any rate Calvin made no concession for doubt. Psalm 88 is commonly thought of as the gloomiest one in the Psalter. In *Commentary on Psalms* he answers the question: “How can this wavering agree with faith?” by the words,

It is true, that when the heart is in perplexity and doubt, ... faith seems to be swallowed up. But experience teaches us, that faith ... continues to rise again from time to time, so as not to be over-

¹⁴ Warfield, 116.

¹⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.7.

whelmed.¹⁶

Calvin was consistent in this point throughout his writings whether in the *Institutes* or *Commentaries*. For example, in the *Institutes* he comments, “It [true faith] therefore justifies not because it grasps a knowledge of God’s essence but because it rests upon the assurance of his mercy.”¹⁷ Justifying faith must come with assurance. Otherwise it is but a kind of lower knowledge which even the devil can share.¹⁸ As for the *Commentaries*, note his exposition upon 1 Corinthians 2:11 which reads,

The purpose and will of God are ... hidden from all men; ... therefore a “Holy of Holies,” inaccessible to men. But yet if the Spirit of God Himself brings us into it, that is, if He makes us surer of those things which are otherwise hidden from our conception, there will be no more room for hesitation.¹⁹

The *testimonium* is the only way we can be convinced whether or not we are in a state of grace. The conviction, moreover, makes “no more room for hesitation.” Calvin expresses this in startling fashion: “those who doubt their possession of Christ and their membership in His body are reprobates,” because, for Calvin, “only true faith ... allows us to rest in God’s grace ... with firm and steadfast assurance.”²⁰ Only

¹⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Ps 88:14, 416-417, vol. 5.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 3.17.11 [on Jm.2:19].

¹⁸e.g. *Inst.* 3.2.15: “Faith is not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion, ... but requires full and fixed certainty.”; 3.2.16: “No man is a believer, I say, except him who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation”

¹⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 1 Cor 2:11, 58, vol. 9.

²⁰ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2Cor 13:5, 173, vol. 10.

because assurance is the essence of faith, can it be the test of faith to judge whether it is true or false.

The Holy Spirit registers assurance in our mind: “the godly mind ... never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy. Rather all the contentions ... result in the certainty of this assurance.”²¹ Also it brings fresh senses to our feeling as well as new peace to our conscience. He spoke of “an assurance ... [that] renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God’s judgment.”²² “There is a far different feeling of full assurance” which is secure tranquility together with sweetness and boldness.²³ Here we see that our mind, conscience, feeling and heart all get involved in the assurance experience. It is both psychological and pneumatological. Far from excluding the psychological dimension of the individual, the Holy Spirit regenerates it and is active in its development. We can conclude that for Calvin assurance, despite its experientiality, does not eliminate, alter or lessen the truth that it is the *essence* of faith. To separate assurance from faith would be equal to an attempt to separate heat from light in the sun!²⁴

The Flesh-Spirit Dichotomy

After giving and interpreting his definition of faith, Calvin also speaks of the down-to-earth side of real faith, the conflict between the

²¹ *Inst.* 3.2.21.

²² *Inst.* 3.2.16.

²³ *Inst.* 3.2.15.

²⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Col 2:2, 325, vol. 11; also see Calvin’s *Comm.* on Eph 3:12, 164, vol. 11.

flesh and the Spirit in the faith experience.²⁵ Some Reformed scholars have tried to utilize this occasion, though not successfully, to remove Calvin's position from insisting that assurance is the essence of faith. For instance, after quoting some paragraphs from the *Institutes* 3.2.15, 17 and 18, Paul Helm jumps to say, "Calvin is well aware that these further remarks of his amount to an important modification of the original definition," which is given in the *Institutes* 3.2.7. And Helm labels it as the "ought to" faith. But "there is no such thing," Helm infers.²⁶ Therefore he reinterprets Calvin's "ought to" faith as follows:

Calvin is recommending to his Christian readers not to be satisfied with a degree of faith that is without assurance. There can be faith without assurance, but that degree of faith is to be sought that is accompanied by assurance.²⁷

This is a misunderstanding, if not a distortion, of Calvin's intention. Helm uses his own position, that real faith can be without assurance, to interpret Calvin's faith. So he says that Calvin's dichotomy of flesh and Spirit is a *modification* of his original definition of "ought to" faith. Calvin does not do that. After the definition of faith in the *Institutes* 3.2.7, he advances to interpret the interaction between faith and life in 3.2.15-28. Calvin's intention is far from modifying anything in the essence of saving faith. Rather, he is eager to see how the essence of faith matures and bears fruits in real life. For Calvin the faith in the *Institutes* 3.2.7 does not only not exclude the dichotomy of flesh and Spirit, but also anticipate its development and fruition in the perpetual

²⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.7, 14; and 3.2.15-28 respectively.

²⁶ Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Banner of Truth: Carlisle, PA, 1982), 24-25.

²⁷ Helm, 26.

conflict of the dichotomy. So not be satisfied with your low degree of faith, he will encourage, for assurance has been implanted in your heart and hence let it be mature in faith. Calvin starts differently from Helm. For Calvin assurance will not come into being if it does not exist in the very beginning. Assurance does not come into being after regeneration. Rather, it grows and blossoms in faith life. But for Helm assurance may not exist in the very beginning and then comes into being. Helm indeed misunderstands Calvin.

William Cunningham also tries to resolve the difficulty by explaining that “God seems to have given [Calvin] the grace of assurance more fully and more generally than He does to believers in ordinary circumstances.”²⁸ But Calvin has noticed the seemingly contradictory experience in believers:

Still someone will say: “Believers experience something far different: ... tried by disquiet, ... shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith.” Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-stated doctrine to stand.²⁹

How, then, does he defend his high position in the doctrine of assurance. He recognizes,

Surely, ... we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety Far, indeed are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful

²⁸ Cunningham, 113.

²⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.17.

repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we *deny* that, *in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance*³⁰

Why are there so many clouds in our hearts? Calvin does not only blame what is without, whether temptations or adversities.³¹ Rather,

Unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful.³²

He continues to diagnose it as “hidden weakness” or even as “disease,” so full faith in God’s promises is the medicine with which the Holy Spirit can “cure the disease.”³³ He confesses, faith life is a “hard struggle” between itself in the new image and “unbelief” in the old image. The presence of unbelief indeed perturbs the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, but does not prevent us from enjoying the assurance. He still insists, despite the fact that in this conflict, “there is a far different *feeling* of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith.”³⁴ Further, commenting on several assurance-related Scriptures he maintains that assurance “cannot happen without our truly feeling its *sweetness* and experiencing it in ourselves.”³⁵ There-

³⁰ Ibid. [italics mine]

³¹ See *Inst.* 3.2.20, here he distinguishes “temptations” and “adversities” from “unbelief.”

³² *Inst.* 3.2.15. [italics mine]

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. [italics mine]

³⁵ Ibid. [italics mine]

fore for Calvin the “ought-to” faith is compatible with the real or “is” faith. When he defines what faith is in the *Institutes* 3.2.7, Calvin actually brings all realities of life into consideration. As long as we are truly converted, the “full faith” must work in all phases of our mundane life.

Here we see that, for Calvin, there are two separate sources, addressing themselves to our hearts respectively, though they are mixed in our consciousness. That is the reason why we are confused. To unravel the complex of two separate sources, he says,

In order to understand this, it is necessary to return to that *division of flesh and spirit* Therefore the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness, partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity; partly rests upon the promise of the gospel, partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity; partly rejoices at the expectation of life, partly shudders at death. This variation arises from imperfection of faith Hence arise those conflicts; when unbelief, which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith³⁶

Since the Lord did not pluck out all the roots of the flesh from our hearts when we were saved, there are always remnants of it in this present life. Hence the disease of unbelief cannot be *wholly* cured and the perennial battle of life ensues.

Calvin was an excellent pastor. He observes this interesting paradox in his flock: the reprobates “themselves think that they have a

³⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.18. [italics mine]

true faith”,³⁷ while for the elect “any certainty ... is ... tinged with doubt.”³⁸ He relentlessly shatters the self-confidence of the former and, in sharp contrast, meticulously fuels “a small spark” of the latter.³⁹

How does Calvin counsel the weak soul? He will at first analyze why there is fear in the elect while presumption in the reprobate. The child of God is the only person who is conscious of the pleasure and the wrath of God. According to him, the key faculty of him to be attacked is his conscience. Why is it that “our conscience ... now complains and groans, now accuses itself, now murmurs secretly, now breaks out in open tumult?” Because the believer’s conscience feels God’s wrath towards him and finds that God becomes his deadly enemy!⁴⁰ Right in this moment “unbelief obtains weapons and devices to overthrow faith” by “suggesting that God is our enemy.”⁴¹ It is not unbelief alone that kills weak faith, but it kills weak faith only through an occasion--the wrath and the chastisement of God, as well as the stricken conscience under them.

So the counsel Calvin gives to the weak soul is that “to bear these faith arms and fortifies itself with the Word of Lord.” Only in His gracious promises in the gospel can we find that “he is also merciful

³⁷ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Matt 13:20-21. p. 71, vol. 2. Surely not the reprobates in general, but those with the temporary faith in particular.

³⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.17.

³⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 7:31, 194, vol. 4.

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; *Inst.* 3.2.21.

because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath.”⁴² That is the turning point! Calvin comments, “First, ... faith does not stand firm until a man attains to the freely given promise; second, ... it does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to ⁴³ Let us lay our complaints before Him, let us call upon Him, let us implore His help. As long as believers turn to the Word of God, Calvin concludes,

The godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy. Rather, all the contentions that try and weary it result in the certainty of this assurance.⁴⁴

For Calvin any measure of faith will, and must, ultimately grow into triumphant faith! He confidently announces, “Though it be assailed a thousand times, it will prevail over the entire world.”⁴⁵ In the beginning all the adverse feelings of our conscience seemingly fall into to the hands of unbelief as “weapons and devices,” and are wielded by it to “overthrow faith.” But in the long run unbelief is exposed for its sinfulness and its assaults prove to be means of cultivating the growth and the maturity of faith.

This teaches us the following conclusion: although the presence of the flesh actually grieves, or afflicts, the conscience of the true be-

⁴² *Inst.* 3.2.21.

⁴³ *Inst.* 3.2.30.

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.21.

⁴⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.21. Cf. 3.2.16: “a believer ... leaning upon the assurance ... triumphs over the devils and death.”; 3.2.18: “For the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties “

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liever, in the long run his faith will grow and prevail over it by the sealing of the Holy Spirit. The flesh-Spirit division not only does not prevent assurance, but in fact serves its growth.

Chapter 3

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS ON FAITH AND ASSURANCE

In the last chapter we have examined the implication of Calvin's position in the doctrine of assurance: assurance is the *essence* of faith. We also reviewed his definition of full faith and the dichotomy of flesh and Spirit. Now we will examine how Calvin holds his position in some abnormal conditions. They are cases of temporary faith, implicit faith (in Calvin's, not in the Roman Catholic sense), and the least measure of faith. In each case we are eager to ask the same question: "Is it true faith?" If yes, then we must further enquire: "Is assurance still the essence of such faith?" If not, we must ask why it is not.

Temporary Faith

If we want to know to what extent Calvin insists on the cruciality of assurance in faith-experience, we must examine his doctrine of temporary faith. What is temporary faith? Calvin holds that, "Experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected by almost the same feeling as the elect so that even in their own judgment they do

not in any way differ from the elect.”¹ The idea of “temporary faith” derives from Matt 13:20-21 (cf. Mark 4:16-17; Luke 8:13). Calvin comments,

These are called “temporary,” not only because they fall away in temptation after being professed disciples of Christ for a time, but also because they themselves think that they have a true faith.²

Their faith is but temporary, “for they tarry in but a fleeting awareness,” then “it withers after the passage of time.”³ It is ironical that they deceive themselves into believing they are elect, albeit “under a cloak of hypocrisy,”⁴ whereas the true elect struggle in the flesh-Spirit conflict.

First Calvin admits that even temporary believers experience God’s grace in some sense. But how can they taste such heavenly gifts? He gives several reasons: (1) “For nothing prevents God from illumining some with a momentary awareness of his grace, which afterward vanishes.” (2) “The Lord, to render them more convicted and inexcusable, steals into their minds to the extent that his goodness may be tasted without the Spirit of Adoption.”⁵ (3) “For he is addressing those who had embraced his teaching and is urging them to advance in faith.”⁶ (4) “In the meantime, believers are taught to examine them-

¹ *Inst.* 3.2.11.

² Calvin’s *Comm.* on Matt 13:20-21, p. 72, vol. 2.

³ *Inst.* 3.2.12.

⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.11.

⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.11.

⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.12, here Calvin bases on John 8: 31-32. Obviously *so far* those believers are temporary. It sounds like an Arminian preaching to encourage them “advance in

selves carefully and humbly, lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace assurance of faith.”⁷

Then there arises the question: how do we distinguish true faith, especially deficient or weak but true faith, from false faith?⁸ The affection, the enlightenment of the mind, or even peace in the conscience are not decisive, for the reprobate can also share them, and even a greater degree than true believer may appear to. What, then, of the method of the practical syllogism? It, too, is inadequate, since that “for some years it [temporary faith] may put forth not only blossoms and leaves, but even fruits;”⁹ hence the fruits alone cannot be reliable signs. The only reliable test is the sealing or the *testimonium*, because “only in the elect does that confidence flourish which Paul extols, that they loudly proclaim Abba, Father.”¹⁰ “His goodness may be tasted without the Spirit of adoption” in the reprobate while “the Spirit,

faith!” But Calvin is justified to make such a statement, for nobody knows whether he is one of the elect before he is sealed for adoption. Calvin also calls the transitory faith the common faith, “because there is a great likeness and affinity between transitory faith and living ... faith.” The temporary faith itself is not a bad thing, but a gift. What is repugnant is the presumption before God. So Calvin encourages them, do “not fall from the common faith,” and “advance in faith.” Ibid.

⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.11, the time when “the lower working of the Spirit” takes its course in the reprobate. The confidence of the reprobate is in their *feeling*. Ibid. So believers are warned to be diligent in the growth of grace. Cf. Calvin *Comm.* on Heb 6:4-5, “By this rein the Lord holds us in fear and humility.” 76, vol. 12.

⁸ Or we can put the question in Calvin’s style: “How it can be that one who has once arrived at this point can afterwards fall away.” Calvin’s *Comm.* on Heb 6:4-5, p. 76, vol. 12. The answers are the same.

⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.12.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.11. [italics mine]

strictly speaking, seals forgiveness of sins in the elect *alone*.”¹¹ Calvin labels temporary faith as the “lower working of the Spirit.”¹² In contrast the *testimonium* can “penetrate to the heart itself, there to remain fixed.”¹³ The exclusive faculty in which to implant the seed of life, the living Word of God, is our hearts where God “firmly seals the gift of his adoption in them that it may be steady and sure.”¹⁴ It might be replied that the *testimonium* is only for normal or strong faith whereas weak faith cannot be sure of the adoption of God. But for Calvin this is not so:

We ought to grasp this: however *deficient* or *weak* faith may be in the elect, *still*, because the Spirit of God is for them the sure guarantee and seal of their adoption, the mark he has engraved can never be erased from their hearts....¹⁵

It is very clear for Calvin that the bottom line of true faith is no less than the *testimonium* by which we cry “Abba, Father” and at the time are confirmed in our adoption. No matter how strong or how weak, faith is the faith of certainty, as long as true faith is considered. From the perspective of the *testimonium* temporary faith can be simply defined as the faith which is destitute of the *testimonium*.

¹¹ Ibid. [italics mine]

¹² Ibid. Hence the temporary faith is not a product of Satan, but an interruption or a stopping by him during the generation-process of faith.

¹³ *Inst.* 3.2.10.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.11.

¹⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.12. [italics mine]

Implicit Faith

As to implicit faith, Calvin attacks the Roman Catholic notion of it. The Schoolmen fabricated it and define it as faith that implicitly “accepts as true what the church believes without knowing the objective contents of the faith.”¹⁶ Calvin regards it as “the grossest ignorance,” or “a veil over Christ to hide him.”¹⁷ Calvin also speaks of “implicit faith,” by which he means something different from the Roman Catholic doctrine of it. He discusses his “implicit faith” in the *Institutes* 3.2.4-5. These passages are scarcely free from ambiguity concerning the doctrine of assurance. If his remarks in his *Commentaries* upon Luke 24:11-12, John 4 and 20 are taken into consideration, then this ambiguity develops into a dilemma! (Yet this illustrates Calvin’s concern to follow the Scriptures even when it not give us a systematic and clear-cut description at face value.) He refuses to remove ambiguities. But it can be explained satisfactorily in his biblical theology of two covenants. So still can we make a comfortable judgment that Calvin’s “implicit faith,” if used in the post-resurrection era, is at most the preparation for faith, not the saving faith proper. Therefore Calvin’s consistency in the doctrine that assurance is the essence of faith still stands firm.

What is Calvin’s “implicit faith”? He calls it implicit because it is “still strictly nothing but the preparation of faith.” But on the other hand, those who have such faith do “not advance farther than to *believe* Christ the Messiah” Why it is graced with the title “faith”?

¹⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, under *fides implicita*, 117.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.2, 3.

Only because those who have such faith as the Samaritans in John 4:39 and the nobleman in John 4:50, demonstrate their “teachableness, with the desire to learn.” So Calvin admits that the term itself is not used “in an exact sense,” but shows God’s kindness to “grace that pious affection with such great honor.”¹⁸

Commenting on John 4:39, Calvin writes, “The word *believe* is used loosely here It is in a way the beginning of faith when minds are prepared to receive teaching.”¹⁹ The same term, the “beginning of faith,” is also used to describe the plausibility of the reprobate faith on one hand,²⁰ and the persuasion by the *testimonium* on the other.²¹ (Hence we should not be confused by the term “faith” itself, we should determine its meaning from its context.) But after Jesus Himself came and the Samaritans heard the Lord’s words face to face, “The word believe is now used in a different sense, as meaning not only that they were prepared for faith but were actually filled with true faith.”²² For him, there is no gray area between true faith and quasi-faith. There is always a clear distinction. The “beginning faith” can grace us with teachableness,²³ but we are still in the realm of spiritual darkness until the same Spirit penetrates into our hearts with the light of the Word of God. The critical experience is the *testimonium*. That is very clear.

A similar pattern is evident in the case of the nobleman in John 4:

¹⁸ All cited words in this paragraph are from *Inst.* 3.2.5.

¹⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 4:39, p. 109, vol. 4.

²⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.11.

²¹ *Inst.* 3.2.41.

²² Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 4: 41, p. 109, vol. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

50ff. Twice the nobleman believes. Yet Calvin's expositions made a clear distinction. The first believing is "a special faith referring no further than his son's life," whereas in the second one, "he begins to believe in a different way, in that having embraced Christ's teaching ... [he] acknowledges Christ to be the Son of God"²⁴ No doubt only the latter believing is saving and true faith. While Calvin coins a term, "common faith," to describe the beginning of faith and comments, "I call it *common* because there is a great likeness and affinity between transitory faith and living and permanent faith,"²⁵ we know that for him there always remains a discernible demarcation between them.

To attain the final conclusion about Calvin's position in the case of "implicit faith," we have to solve the toughest dilemma exhibited in his works: whether or not the backsliding disciples had been converted before Jesus' resurrection. If they had not been converted, then their "faith" before revival by the resurrected Christ is but "implicit faith." If they had been converted, it becomes a dilemma. For in this situation the disciples obviously had only the least measure of faith, but that was almost dead, and they struggled without assurance! Then Calvin's consistency in his doctrine of assurance seems to be untenable.

The former suggestion is impossible. For when the apostle John met Jesus for the first time and asked Him, "*Where abidest thou?*" Calvin comments that "the very beginning of the Church" was formed and after following the Lamb of God, they found "in Christ the for-

²⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 4:53, p. 115, vol. 4.

²⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.12.

givenness of sins” and acquired “such a taste for Christ.”²⁶ After the first miracle at the wedding of Cana, “His disciples believed on him.” From these two incidents in the Gospel John, Calvin observes that though their “tinge of faith” is still in its infancy, they nevertheless “were already believers.”²⁷ Calvin’s *Commentaries* on the Gospels abound with similar statements. He holds that the disciples were converted long before the resurrection.

Then we have to face Calvin’s dilemma. Yet Calvin seems inconsistent here. Commenting on the incident in which John and Peter came to the empty tomb on Easter morning, he writes,

The ignorance that as yet occupied their minds so enveloped their faith in darkness that were almost dumfounded. Hence, also, it said that they finally believed ... because the seed of hidden faith--which had been *dead*, as it were, in their hearts--at that time burst through with renewed vigor! For there was in them a true but implicit faith because they had reverently embraced Christ as their sole teacher.²⁸

These words cause considerable difficulties, but their significance becomes clear in the light of a careful reading of Calvin.

First of all Calvin defines another kind of “implicit faith” in the *Institutes* 3.2.4, different from that in 3.2.5. The “implicit faith” quoted above (3.2.4) is true faith while that described in *Institutes* 3.2.5. is but a preparatory orientation of mind before true faith. Calvin also

²⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 1:36-38, p. 37, vol. 4.

²⁷ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 2:11, p. 50, vol. 4.

²⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.4. [italics mine]

calls the former “implicit faith,” “not only because many things are as yet hidden from us, but because [we are] surrounded by many clouds of error.”²⁹ But here lies the dilemma: true faith can be *dead* for a time! “Dead” means “faith ... seemed to be destroyed ..., hidden and buried in his heart.”³⁰ “Dead” appears to imply the absence of assurance. Calvin finds the teaching in the Bible and states it in his works. And he does not harmonize this apparent contradiction with his doctrine of assur

Calvin finds a similar phenomenon in John 2:11. Before Jesus’ first miracle, the disciples already had “some tinge of faith.” But that is “an *uncertain* and *cloudy* faith” till this miracle stimulates them to progress in faith.³¹ Again there could be faith without certainty in Calvin’s mind! The same is true in the case of Thomas. After he suddenly exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” it shows that “faith was not entirely extinguished in him, though it had been smothered.” Calvin concludes that “faith which seemed to be *destroyed* was, so to speak, *hidden* and *buried* in his heart.”³² Nobody will be convinced that this obstinate and slow Thomas could have any assurance hidden in the bottom of his smothered faith. So is the case of the backsliding disciples on the road to Emmaus.³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:28. p. 210, vol. 5.

³¹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 2:11, p. 50, vol. 4. [italics mine]

³² Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:28. [italics mine]

³³ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Luke 24:13ff, p. 232, vol. 3. Calvin says that, “With outstretched hand He [Jesus] leads them to the ground of certainty, that they may cease from their tossing.” It implies that now on the way apart from Jerusalem they are smothered without assurance. See another two cases in Calvin’s *Comm.* on John

Having discovered that the disciples might have faith without assurance, could Calvin still defend his doctrine that faith must have assurance? The answer is yes, and lies in the *testimonium*. Assurance comes only from the *testimonium*. That assurance is the essence of faith is guaranteed by the certainty of the *testimonium*. The certainty of the *testimonium* in turn is guaranteed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which characterizes the new aeon since Pentecost. Is the *testimonium* guaranteed before it? Not necessarily. The choicest saints the Lord sovereignly bestows the precious *testimonium*; but it is not a permanent endowment upon any single saint. Thus is the case with John, Peter, Thomas, or the disciples before the wedding of Cana. They apprehend faith when they encounter Jesus. The Holy Spirit actually works in their hearts. They may taste the joy of salvation when they witness Jesus exercising his first miracle. But when persecutions or temptations come, their assurance withers, or even passes away. But once Jesus is resurrected, everything is changed, for a new dispensation begins. In the post-resurrection aeon, the great abundance of the outpoured Spirit always seals the certainty of faith in the heart of each child of God. So Calvin maintains,

Faith has its degrees of seeing Christ. The ancient prophets beheld Christ afar off, ... as He made Himself intimately and completely visible when He came down to men from heaven.³⁴

This difference consists *primarily* not in the subjective apprehension of it from the human side, but in the objective dispensation from the

16:31, p. 132, vol. 5 and on John 20:3, p. 193, vol. 5.

³⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 8:56, p. 234, vol. 4.

divine.³⁵

Ronald S. Wallace articulates six points to elucidate how Calvin asserts the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant while he also insists on the “substantial unity of old and new covenants.”³⁶ The first is that, “Revelation under the New Covenant is more *rich and full* than the Old.” Wallace explains:

The Holy Spirit was “more abundantly given” under the gospel than under the law, when God gave His redemptive gifts “not so freely and extensively” as now. Commenting on the quotation from Joel in Acts 2:17, “I will pour my Spirit upon all flesh,” Calvin notes a “twofold antithesis” between the times of the two covenants, “for the *pouring out* signifies a great abundance, whereas there was under the law a more scarce distribution. *All flesh* signifies an infinite multitude, whereas God in times past did vouchsafe to bestow such full participation of His Spirit only upon a few.”³⁷

That is what happened on Pentecost. But they had a foretaste of it right after Easter. For on Easter night when Jesus came to visit and greet them, “He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” [John 20:22, NKJV] So what would happen actually on Pentecost now happened symbolically that night or during the forty

³⁵ So the doctrine of assurance is sovereignly ordained by God in the new dispensation. Once the Holy Spirit has been outpoured, the ever smothered disciples could stand firm and would not lose their assurance any more because of the *testimonium* in the new era.

³⁶ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Geneva Divinity School Press: Tyler, Tx, 1953, 1982), 32-39.

³⁷ Wallace, 33. His quotations are from Calvin's *Comm.* on Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17.

days. Calvin comments,

But if Christ then bestowed His Spirit on the apostles by breathing, it could seem superfluous to send the Spirit afterwards For when the Spirit appeared on them in tongues of fire, they were entirely renewed This breathing should therefore be referred and extended especially to that magnificent sending of the Spirit which He had so often promised.³⁸

Then Calvin is justified in saying, “The seed of hidden faith --which had been *dead*, as it were, in their hearts--at that time burst through with renewed vigor!”³⁹ That is the assurance. That is what the disciples experienced. Jesus has ushered in the new post-resurrection era of which the *testimonium* is the very index. Therefore there is no contradiction for Calvin. Implicit faith, true but without assurance, is only possible before Easter-Pentecost. Afterwards, the redemptive activities of the Holy Spirit of the new era guarantees the *testimonium*, it in turn guarantees the assurance in faith. Calvin’s position in the doctrine of assurance can still be vindicated in all the cases of his “implicit faith,” if we add the dispensational factor into consideration.

The Least Measure of Faith

It is, as we have seen, beyond question that all the conflicts incurred by the dichotomy of flesh and Spirit will finally result in, or grow into triumphant faith, i.e. assurance. But is it still assured during

³⁸ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:22. p. 205, vol. 5.

³⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.4. [italics mine] See also Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:28, “the good seed, which had lain smothered, springs up.” and “some sparks of faith ... He afterwards rekindles by the breath of His Spirit at the right time.”

the struggle-process itself? We may put the question in another way: “Is assurance still secured in the beginning of faith, or the least measure of faith?” As in the cases of temporary faith and implicit faith, the only index to distinguish true faith from false or quasi-faith is the *testimonium*. Hence the assurance of faith lies not in its strength, but in its genuineness. Its genuineness in turn is judged by whether or not it is sealed through the Holy Spirit with the promises of salvation.

Calvin uses a series of phrases to describe the inception or the tinyness of our faith, such as: “the beginning of believing,” “a least drop of faith,” “a tiny portion,” “a small drop of faith,” “little faith,” “the smallness of faith,” “the root of faith,” “the beginning of faith,” “a small spark of right attitude,” etc.⁴⁰ From these and similar passages we can find what they share in common.

Faith is “the unique gift of the Spirit,” for everyone attains faith through the *testimonium* of his adoption. The *testimonium* is not a so-called “second blessing.” Calvin insists, “The beginning of believing *already* contains within itself the reconciliation whereby man approaches God.”⁴¹ The “quality of faith,” he points out, is not “cold.”⁴² The “warmth” comes from the persuasion of the Holy Spirit from the beginning.⁴³ It is such an abrupt change that it does not “warm up” little by little and hence leave some “cool” moments without assurance from the outset, but comes with degrees of assurance.

⁴⁰ See *Inst.* 3.2.8, 19, 20, 20, 21, 21, 41; Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 7:31 respectively.

⁴¹ *Inst.* 3.2.8.

⁴² *Ibid.* [italics mine]

⁴³ *Inst.* 3.2.41: “We are persuaded also by the testimony of the Holy Spirit that salvation is stored up for us.”

When man approaches the concept of assurance, he is liable to define it in terms of his own *consciousness* and *feeling*. In contrast, Calvin basically regards it as a persuasion just as faith is. Assurance also starts from the illumination of the mind. The knowledge of God, rather than our feeling, constitutes the gist of our assurance:

When first even the least drop of faith is instilled in our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and calm and gracious toward us....Yet, by being ignorant of certain things, or by rather obscurely discerning what it does discern, the mind is not hindered from enjoying a clear knowledge of the divine will toward itself. *For what it discerns comprises the first and principal parts in faith.*⁴⁴

Why is “the least drop of faith” enough to be real faith? While it is far from perfect faith, it is sufficient to enjoy a clear saving knowledge of God, which is no less than assurance of our salvation. And the instilling of it into our minds is exactly the *testimonium*. Calvin thus illustrates it:

It is like a man who, shut up in a prison into which the sun's rays shine obliquely and half obscured through a rather narrow window, is indeed deprived of the full sight of the sun We are nevertheless illumined *as much as need be* for firm assurance....⁴⁵

With “even a small drop of faith” we can “behold God's glory!”⁴⁶ Such certainty comes from the Holy Spirit. Once dwelling in our

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.19. [italics mine]

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* [italics mine]

⁴⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.20.

hearts, the Spirit works with even the least measure of faith so that we can not be hindered from beholding God's glory.

We have discussed the beginning phase of faith. But there is another circumstance in which we are so smothered that only a spark of faith remains. That is when we are attacked so violently by temptations and adversities that we are overtaken by our flesh. Calvin confesses,

I do not deny ... that certain interruptions of faith occasionally occur, according as its weakness is violently buffeted hither and thither; so in the thick darkness of temptations its light is snuffed out. Yet whatever happens, *it ceases not its quest for God.*⁴⁷

Why do we not “depart from the certain assurance” and keep questing for God?⁴⁸ Calvin replies to that question by comparing the examples of David and Ahaz. He says, “We shall find a great difference.”⁴⁹ Isaiah was sent to bring a remedy to Ahaz, a hypocritical king. What did Ahaz do? “Turn aside from God when one does not open the door for himself by faith.”⁵⁰ But David, an elect, was different. In great crises the saints “are aware of their own weak-mindedness, they pray ...sometimes become dumb ..., but persevere in their struggle.”⁵¹ “Our conscience now complains and groans, now accuses itself, now murmurs secretly, now breaks out in open tumult.”⁵² Calvin infers, on

⁴⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.24. [italics mine]

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Inst.* 3.2.20.

the one hand, that the saint “is not only displeased with himself for these weaknesses, but earnestly strives to correct them;”⁵³ but on the other hand, “faith, however small, will be accepted by God.”⁵⁴

Then what is the role of the Comforter?

He [God] sets before them the aid of the Spirit, which is abundantly sufficient to overcome all difficulties....

The Spirit itself takes part of the burden which oppresses our weakness, and not only gives us help and succour but *lifts us up*

These resources of the Spirit instruct us with *greater certainty* that it is by God’s appointment that we strive with groanings and sighings for our redemption.⁵⁵

As long as there is a small spark of faith, the saint will pray. That is the difference between the believer and the unbeliever. We groan and we sigh, but the Holy Spirit is always the cause and the author of our certainty of salvation. Here Calvin paves the way for the later Puritans as “the physicians of the soul.” Let us look at his diagnosis of the weak, in distinction from the wicked, soul:

Therefore Isaiah tells us how useful ... Christ’s gentleness is to evoke reverence from believers I am not talking about unbelievers, who are completely empty of any grace of the Spirit, but of those who have already been called by the Lord and in whom He will in due course kindle a fuller light, supply a firmer

⁵³ *Inst.* 3.2.17.

⁵⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 7:31, p. 194, vol. 4.

⁵⁵ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 8:26, p. 177, vol. 8. [italics mine]

strength. Are they not all like half-broken reeds and smoking lamp-wicks?

Therefore ... take care to spare the weak and cherish and increase God's grace, yet weak in them, so on the other hand they must beware not to indulge the obstinate malice of those who are *far from* being a smoking wick or a shaking reed.⁵⁶

For Calvin the pastor the doctrine of "the least measure of faith" is highly practical, not simply theological. So in his pastoral care he prescribes two diametrically opposite treatments for the "weak" and the "wicked." The difference lies not in their senses, but in "some spark ... [which] still remained in his mind. He is deeply convinced that it would "quickly burst into flame."⁵⁷

In the case of the least measure of faith, the gracious Spirit still works assurance in our hearts through our supplication to God. Therefore Calvin's general view of the doctrine of assurance, that it is the essence of true faith, stands firm.

While these three "abnormalities" in faith appear similar, so that Calvin describes them by the same name "the beginning of faith," nevertheless, he clearly discriminates among them: temporary faith is but a presumption of the reprobate; implicit faith is a preparation for true faith; and the least measure of faith is real faith with promising growth of it ahead. Only the last one is characterized with the *testimonium*. The *testimonium* will be discussed in more detail in the next three chapters.

⁵⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 12:19, p. 37, vol. 2. [italics mine]

⁵⁷ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 20:28, p. 210, vol. 5.

John Calvin on the Doctrine of Assurance

Chapter 4
PRELIMINARY REMARKS
ON *TESTIMONIUM SPIRITUS SANCTI*

The doctrine of the *testimonium* is the ground of faith and assurance. Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance is defined by it. What is the *testimonium*? It "not only attests and seals abundantly in our souls the truth of the prophetic and apostolic doctrine, but also effectually bends and moves our hearts to embrace and follow it."¹ So there are two essential aspects of its effect: the attestation of Scripture and the assurance of salvation. We must keep them in mind as we examine the details of Calvin's doctrine of the *testimonium*.

Historical Background

B. B. Warfield avers that "Calvin had no predecessors in the formulation of the doctrine [*testimonium*]." The work of the Fathers and Scholastics "reveals only ... sporadic assertions of the dependence of man on the inward teaching of the Holy Spirit for the knowledge or

¹ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1861, 1934 [German], translated by G. T. Thomson, 1950 (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1978, 1984), 24.

the saving knowledge of God”² Based upon the research of Warfield and Jacques Pannier,³ Ramm also concludes: “There is nothing on the subject before Calvin.”⁴ Early in 1536 we see the doctrine already in germ in *The Geneva Confession*, of which the fourth article mentions the necessity of the illumination of the mind.⁵ But, as Warfield claims,

It was left, then, to the edition of 1539 to create the whole doctrine at, as it were, a single stroke. For ... Calvin’s whole exposition of the doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit to the divinity of Scripture appears all at once in its completeness in the ... *Insti-*

² B. B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” *The Princeton Theological Review*, vii. 1909. Collected in *Calvin and Augustine*, 1956 (Presbyterian & Reformed: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1980), 116. Ramm comments, “In many ways this is the finest presentation of the *testimonium* and an excellent view of Calvin’s opinion.” Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1959), 133.

³ Ramm mentions one work by Jacques Pannier, *Le temoignage du Saint-Esprit* (Librairie Fishbacher: Paris, 1893). He comments, “One of the few specialized works on the *testimonium* but occasionally marred by intrusions of opinions of the French liberal school Sabatier.” Ramm, 132-133.

⁴ Ramm, 24. The datings of Pannier, Warfield and Ramm are 1893, 1909 and 1959 respectively. But as Ramm relies upon the former two heavily and Warfield again on Pannier and P. Du Moulin (1636), so Ramm’s conclusion here is obviously a judgment of the turn of the century. “Could it be possible that Calvin derived it, borrowed it, or developed it from contemporary spiritualists or late medieval theologians? This is a task for further research in Reformation theology. Here I am temporarily accepting Warfield’s interpretation.

⁵ John Calvin, “The Geneva Confession (1536),” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, translated by J. K. S. Reid (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1954), 27. This *Confession* was presented to the magistracy of Geneva on November 10, 1536 by Farel and Calvin. Though more recent scholars would like to credit Farel with the authorship (see 25), the doctrine of illumination reveals the finger print of Calvin.

tutes ... of 1539. This exposition was reproduced without curtailment or alteration in all subsequent editions⁶

Without any historical clue can we still find some explanation for the generation of this doctrine in Calvin's mind?

The first clue would be his abrupt conversion experience. "Calvin himself maintained a reticence about it--save for the one occasion in the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*."⁷

I was ... set to learning law ..., yet God at last turned my course in another direction by the secret rein of his providence. What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years--for I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness ... set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by, anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner, a raw recruit.⁸

This is his conversion experience and hence that of the *testimonium*!⁹

⁶ Warfield, 122.

⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Lion: Batavia, Ill, 1975), 26.

⁸ Parker, 193.

⁹ P. Sprenger compares Calvin's language about his conversion in his *Calvin's Comm.* on Psalms with Paul's conversion in *Calvin's Comm.* on Acts 9:18, then concludes that the latter one is a source of his conversion too. Calvin comments on Acts 9:18 in terms of the *testimonium*. But Parker objects to this comparison. See Parker,

Dr. Parker would set the date in the latter end of 1529 or early in 1530.¹⁰ Therefore Calvin's may reasonably have initial discovery of this doctrine from his conversion experience, and then confirms and develops it from his insights in Bible studies. By early 1536 he has formulated this doctrine into Article Four of *The Geneva Confession*.¹¹

A further clue lies in Calvin's context. Against the background of the Roman magisterium, God illuminated his eyes to recognize that the true authority is the Word and to taste the sweetness of biblical godliness. For Calvin also found in the doctrine of the *testimonium* the invincible weapon to prevail over the challenges of the papacy, as well as fanatics and rationalistics.¹² Therefore his sudden experience in conversion, assiduous exposition in Scripture and doctrinal challenges in context all converged to call an identical response from the Reformer--the emergence of the doctrine of the *testimonium*.

The Necessity of the *Testimonium*

Is the *testimonium* the only way for God to reveal His saving knowledge to man? To answer this question we have to find all the biblical sources on the knowledge of God, and then we will study their relationship, and finally we can justify the necessity of the *testimonium*.

192-193.

¹⁰ Parker, 195, 26.

¹¹ See below in this chapter, p.*.

¹² Ramm, 12-16. As to countering the fanatics, Calvin asserts the union of the Word and Spirit especially in *Inst.* 1.9; as to the rationalistics, the depravity of mind and the necessity of its illumination of the Spirit in 1.6-7.

The twofold knowledge of God

It is good for us to study the overall structure of Calvin's last edition, 1559, *Institutes from the perspective of the knowledge of God at the outset*. Dr. Dowey asserts that "the really significant ordering principle of the *Institutes* in the 1559 edition is the *duplex cognitio Domini*, not the Apostles' Creed."¹³ We do not have to enter into this debate, although, we can still benefit by his research. As a matter of fact, Calvin claims,

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 he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge of God we shall now discuss....¹⁴

Calvin clearly distinguishes the knowledge of God as the Creator from God as the Redeemer. Furthermore, Calvin found that for the former one there are two sources, namely nature, or the creation, and the Bible; and for the latter, only one source, Christ as revealed in the Bible. In spite of the twofold knowledge of God, there is only one God. Hence these two aspects of it cannot be separated and must be inte-

¹³ Dowey, 43. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.18. But this view is objected to by T. H. L. Parker. See his *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 117-125. However, Battles in his note 3 of the *Inst.* 1.2.1 supports Dowey's view when commenting on the *duplex cognitio Domini*: "The distinction, 'twofold' knowledge, added to the *Institutes* in 1559, is basic to the structure of the completed work." Calvin repeated it in 1.6.1, 2; 1.10.1; 1.13.9, 11, 23, 24; 1.14.20, 21 and 2.6.1. See also Battles' *Analysis of the Institutes* for his charts to show the shifts and additions in chief editions of the *Institutes*, 15-16.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 1.2.1.

grated as a whole.

Calvin's strategy to search for the certainty of the knowledge of God is manifested in his *Institutes*: its potentiality to know God as the Creator from nature--the general revelation (*Inst.* 1.2-5), the need of Scripture--the special revelation--to attain it (*Inst.* 1.6), the need of the *testimonium* for the attestation of Scripture in the mind of man (*Inst.* 1.7), and finally the grace of the *testimonium* and its salvific fruits--faith and the assurance of salvation--to know God as the Redeemer (*Inst.* 3.1-3).

From his approach we observe three implications: Firstly, Calvin treats the doctrine of faith and assurance in the structure of the twofold knowledge of God. Secondly, he starts from nature and moves to the Word, and from the knowledge of the Creator and moves to that of Redeemer. There is a theological priority in it. Moreover, the knowledge of the Creator is indispensable and also forms the base of the knowledge of the Redeemer. Thirdly, "Until his last edition Calvin places faith first in order in his soteriology as a kind of epistemological introduction" to the knowledge of God the Redeemer, as Dowey remarks, "parallel to presenting his doctrines of the revelation in creation and Scripture as an epistemological introduction to the knowledge of God the Creator."¹⁵ Therefore, following the path set by Calvin, we have to study logically from the first one, the possibility of knowledge from nature. Now we have to ask whether Calvin had natural theology at first.

¹⁵ Dowey, 151-152. Cf. Battles' note 2 in the *Inst.* 1.7.1.

Calvin's view on natural theology

Calvin has inquired such a question as “whether men can reach a genuine and clear knowledge of God by nature.”¹⁶ By nature, or creation, he does not mean the external world only, but man himself as well. From the progress in the *Institutes* 1.2-5 we can discern that there are two categories: the internal revelations by subjective perceptions which include the sense of divinity and the conscience, and the external revelations by experiences which include nature and history.¹⁷ If we again distinguish nature in terms of its origin and design, then we see that the four elements mentioned above can be developed into the so-called Five-Ways arguments, the rational proofs of the existence of God.¹⁸

Let us start from the inner world. Calvin argues that there is a “sense of divinity,” or called “sense of deity,” or “awareness of divinity,” or “seed of religion.”¹⁹ It is what “God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. ... So deeply ... so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all!”²⁰ It is a doctrine which one does not have to learn, but can master from his mother's womb, “and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.”²¹ Calvin comments, “So

¹⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 17:27, p. 119, vol. 7.

¹⁷ Dowey, 50.

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 1895-1899, 1918. translated by William Hendriksen, 1951 (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1983), 68-80.

¹⁹ *Inst.* 1.3.3, 1.

²⁰ *Inst.* 1.3.1.

²¹ *Inst.* 1.3.3.

impossible is it to blot this from man's mind that natural disposition would be more easily altered " Hence he says, idolatry -- a twist of the sense of divinity -- "is ample proof of this conception."²² With this inner sense and without outer perceptions, man should be sufficed to know God inwardly.

While the seed of religion "refers generally to a numinous awareness of God," Battles comments that conscience, a closely related faculty, refers to "a moral response to God."²³ Calvin juxtaposes them as "two main parts in that light which yet remains in corrupt nature."²⁴ He calls conscience as "innate power to judge between good and evil," or "a universal judgment discriminating between good and evil" which "stands in the place of law."²⁵ As long as God engraves the law of righteousness upon man's mind, man "surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life."²⁶ Conscience makes man know that God is a moral governor.

Let us turn to the external world. The order is very important. The knowledge of God due to the objective revelation is "neither the immediacy of the *sensus divinitatis* nor the a priori reasoning of such a thinker as Anselm. It is a combination of empirical observation and ratiocination."²⁷ So it is an *a posteriori* experience. Therefore after the seed of religion, starting from the *Institutes* 1.5.1, Calvin adds that

²² *Inst.* 1.3.1.

²³ Note 2 of *Inst.* 1.3.1.

²⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 1:5, p.12, vol. 4.

²⁵ *Inst.* 2.2.22, 24.

²⁶ *Inst.* 2.2.22.

²⁷ Dowey, 75.

God also “revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.”²⁸ For him the universe is but a “mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible,”²⁹ and we are “completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness.”³⁰

In addition to the created world, he also says, “If there is no need to go outside ourselves to comprehend God, what pardon will the indolence of that man deserve who is loath to descend within himself to find God?”³¹ Why? It is because man, a microcosm, “is a rare example of God’s power, goodness, and wisdom, and ... enough miracles”³² Such natural experiences should imply the clear knowledge of God.

Beside “the ordinary course of nature” mentioned above, there is a “second kind of works” which is God’s administration in “human society.”³³ These two are “corresponding roughly to God’s creative and providential work.”³⁴ Here his argument is more discursive than others. The basic rule is: God “declares his clemency to the godly and his severity to the wicked and criminal”³⁵ through His providence. He

²⁸ *Inst.* 1.5.1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Inst.* 1.5.3.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Inst.* 1.5.7.

³⁴ Dowey, 75.

³⁵ *Inst.* 1.5.7.

follows His own rule. But how does he explain obvious social injustice? Calvin counsels that, firstly, you should have “a far different consideration”: by punishing *one* sin, it means that God hates all sins; secondly, Calvin appeals to the eschatological judgment to vindicate God’s justice. But Calvin maintains that God loves to see His fatherly kindness prevail through His chastisement of sinners. His providence demonstrates His divine attributes.³⁶

Now let us go back to the question again: “Does Calvin have his natural theology?” Actually, after long discussions (*Inst.* 1.2.1-1.5.9.), Calvin does announce: “We are called to a knowledge of God.”³⁷ But all arguments presuppose in the beginning (*Inst.* 1.2.1.) a condition -- “if Adam remained upright.” Under that condition Calvin is convinced that “the primal and simple knowledge” of God could make man “not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory.”³⁸ Its original purpose is to promote true piety³⁹ and to arouse us to worship God.⁴⁰ Battles claims in the note, “The revelation of God in creation, for Calvin, would have been the basis of a sound natural theology only ‘if Adam had remained upright.’”⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Inst.* 1.5.9.

³⁸ *Inst.* 1.2.1. In 1.2.2. he expresses similar idea, to fear God and credit goodness to Him.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 1.5.10.

⁴¹ Note 2 in *Inst.* 1.2.1. Battles says that *Inst.* 1.2-5 is the *locus classicus* for a discussion of “natural theology” in Calvin.

But Adam fell into sin! Despite this fact God still speaks through the order of nature, yet He does so with an accidental purpose.⁴² Only by God's saving grace will the original purpose of the general knowledge of God be restored upon the regenerate. Therefore, for Calvin, there is no natural theology because Adam, together with all his posterity, fell into sin and failed it.

Inexcusability

The accidental function which the general knowledge of God still serves to the natural man is to make man inexcusable before God. That is the position of Calvin concerning the general revelation. It is concisely demonstrated in his *Commentary* on Rom. 1:20:

The manifestation of God ... is *sufficiently* clear as far as its own light is concerned. It is, however, inadequate on account of our *blindness*. But we are *not* so blind that we can *plead ignorance* without being convicted of perversity.⁴³

The *Five-Ways* arguments, as discussed above, converge to one conclusion for Calvin: no excuse at all. Thus Calvin concludes in the *Institutes* 1.5.15: "All excuse is cut off."⁴⁴ It is so "even without the Word."⁴⁵ Today it makes man feel "convicted of perversity."⁴⁶ Niesel

⁴² Cf. Calvin's *Comm.* on Gen 2:16, 126. Calvin says that the Law became the minister of death due to the corruption of our nature. It is so accidentally.

⁴³ Calvin's *Comm.* on Rom 1:20, p. 31, vol. 8. [italics mine]

⁴⁴ Also see *Inst.* 1.4.1, inexcusable through the sense of divinity; 1.5.1, through nature; 2.2.22; 2.8.1, through conscience; Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 14:17, 12-13, vol. 7, through providence.

⁴⁵ *Calvin's Comm.* on Acts 14:17, p. 17, vol. 7.

⁴⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on Rom 1:20, p. 31, vol. 8.

comments in a similar sense that it makes man “burdened with guilt.”⁴⁷ In the future it will also deprive man of any excuse before the judgment-seat of God.⁴⁸

The necessity of the *testimonium*

Very logically Calvin came to the conclusion: “It is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe.”⁴⁹ The help is His Word. Why? For only “Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”⁵⁰ With “the aid of spectacles” we “recognize God not only as Creator but also as Redeemer.”⁵¹ This knowledge will lead us into salvation.

It is not nature leading us to know the Creator God, but the Word. For “the minds of men are blind to this light of nature ... until they are enlightened by the Spirit of God and ... behold the true God.” Without the enlightened Word man can only imagine a vague God, or a shadow of deity in his darkness.⁵² Hence the Word of God is the only way to the twofold knowledge of God.

But only the Word itself still cannot heal the ignorance of man. The problem totally lies in the mind and the heart of man. It needs the

⁴⁷ Niesel, 49.

⁴⁸ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 1:20, p. 31, vol. 8.

⁴⁹ *Inst.* 1.6.1. Calvin discusses the Word in 1.6, and that the Word agrees with the general revelation in 1.10. In between (1.7-9) he asserts the authority of the Word.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Calvin’s *Comm.* on Heb 11:3, p. 159, vol. 12.

Holy Spirit not only to reveal the revelation of God in His Word, but also to restore the spiritual understanding in the mind of man. Man has to have his sight restored in order to receive light. Commenting on spiritual insight Calvin says, “The greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!” in knowing God and His promises in salvation.⁵³ When the Spirit calls men “darkness,” He makes a good diagnosis and hence “at once denies them any ability of spiritual understanding.”⁵⁴ In addition to the darkness of the mind, man’s heart becomes haughty, depraved, full of proud vanity and obstinacy.⁵⁵ Calvin judges, “the heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought.”⁵⁶ When all human senses fail, it is very evident that God, through man’s fall, necessarily ordains the *testimonium* as the inner teacher to recover the knowledge of God as vast as the sea.⁵⁷ Early in 1536 Calvin has concludes this in *The Geneva Confession* under the fourth article, “Natural Man”:

We acknowledge man by nature to be blind, darkened in understanding, and full of corruption and perversity of heart, so that of himself he has no power to be able to comprehend the true knowledge of God as is proper, nor to apply himself to good works. But on the contrary, if he is left by God to what he is by

⁵³ *Inst.* 2.2.18. 2.2.18-21 is the *locus classicus* of Calvin discussing the necessity of the *testimonium*.

⁵⁴ *Inst.* 2.2.19.

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 1.3.1; 1.2.2; 1.4.1 respectively.

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

⁵⁷ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Matt 16:17, p. 185, vol. 2.

nature, he is only able to live in ignorance and to be abandoned to all iniquity. Hence he has need to be illumined by God, so that he comes to the right knowledge of his salvation, and thus to be re-directed in his affections and reformed to the obedience of the righteousness of God.⁵⁸

The *Testimonium* and Pentecost

In his *Commentary* on Acts, Calvin relates the *testimonium* to Pentecost very closely. He announces, “We today have out of the Gospel, where Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, shines with full mid-day brightness.”⁵⁹ For the Holy Spirit has been poured forth. In three ways he compares the Law with the Gospel with respect to the grace of the Spirit: as to its volume of the grace, it is more sparing compared with great abundance; as to its objects, only few with a great multitude of the faithful; as to the knowledge of God, obscure, slender and veiled with full mid-day brightness.

The *testimonium*, characteristic of the Gospel age

Then following Peter’s preaching upon the prophesy of Joel, Calvin, a typical cessationist, thought that “although the visible gifts of the Spirit have ceased, God has not withdrawn His Spirit from His Church. Rather he interprets the implication of the gift of prophecy as follows:

The word ‘prophesy’ therefore signifies simply the rare and excellent gift of understanding: ... under the Kingdom of Christ ...

⁵⁸ Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, 27.

⁵⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Acts 2:17, p. 58, vol. 6.

all men should be endowed with spiritual wisdom to the extent of excelling in prophetic gifts.⁶⁰

This is the gift of the illumination of the *testimonium*! It is the characteristic of the new age which is inaugurated by the ordination of Jesus as the Lord in heaven. “The day of Pentecost” Calvin rather denotes as “the uninterrupted course of the one day from the time when Christ put forth the power of His Spirit until the last resurrection.”⁶¹ Since that day the Lord has poured the efficacy of the Spirit into our hearts to cause the experience of faith. This is also the proper time for Christ to come to anoint the Most Holy (Dan. 9:24), for “He was anointed by the Father to pour forth a manifold abundance from His own fullness on us.”⁶² Anointing is another appellation for the *testimonium*.⁶³

The *testimonium* and the New covenant

The substance of the Gospel age subsists in the New Covenant. There are three heads to this Covenant, namely inward renewal of the heart, free remission of sins and illumination of the mind.⁶⁴ For the first head it is obvious that without the *testimonium* God cannot renew our hearts and write His laws upon them, hence God’s laws will not be of effect. That is what Paul says that the letter kills. But with it our hearts are softened to obey God’s commandments willingly. Then

⁶⁰ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Acts 2:17, p. 59, vol. 6.

⁶¹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 14:20, p. 84, vol. 5.

⁶² Calvin’s *Comm.* on 1 John 2:20, p. 259, vol. 5.

⁶³ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2Cor 1:21, p. 23, vol. 10.

⁶⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Heb 8:10, p. 110, vol. 12.

remission of sins is “the origin of the new covenant.”⁶⁵ But only through the *testimonium* can this grace be sealed to the heart of the elect. The third one is part of the first one. Only through the illumination of the mind can we read the laws inscribed upon our hearts “so that we know the will of God and turn our hearts to obey it.”⁶⁶ Hence the cruciality of the *testimonium* is disclosed convincingly in the fact that only through it is the substance of the New Covenant implemented thoroughly.

The *testimonium* and the Law

The *testimonium* is the characteristic of the new age, however, Calvin confesses, in the old time “the godly were enlightened by the same Spirit of faith.”⁶⁷ They at least include “Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.”⁶⁸ But God only provides one mirror in which “holy men of old knew God only by beholding him.”⁶⁹ Calvin interprets it more clearly in his *Commentary* on Jer. 31:33. ranting that there is “a difference between the Law and the Gospel, for the Gospel brings with it the grace of regeneration [the *testimonium*],” then he raises a question: “Was the grace of regeneration wanting the Fathers under the Law?”⁷⁰ He answers:

The Fathers, who were formerly regenerated, obtained this favour

⁶⁵ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Jer 31:34, p. 138, vol. 10.

⁶⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Heb 8:11, p. 112, vol. 12.

⁶⁷ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 8:15, p. 169, vol. 8.

⁶⁸ *Inst.* 4.8.5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Jer 31:33, pp. 130-131, vol. 10.

through Christ, so that we may say, that it was as it were transferred to them from another source. The power then to penetrate into the heart was not inherent in the Law, but it was a benefit transferred to the Law from the Gospel.⁷¹

This exposition is great! Above we see that Calvin maintains there is but one source--Christ. Here he made a further step to say it must be the Christ in the Gospel. All the *testimonia* are drawn from the Gospel. The *testimonium* was not *inherent* in the Law. All the *testimonia* in the age of the Law were *transferred* from the Gospel. The transcendent God surely can cross over the barrier of time to do the work which is pleasing to Him, though not distinctive of its dispensation. So before Pentecost and afterwards there is a great difference: "This grace of God was rare and little known under the Law; but that under the Gospel the gifts of the Spirit have been abundantly poured forth, and that God has dealt more bountifully with his Church."⁷²

Law and Gospel

Under the light mentioned above can we make a sound exposition of the Pauline comparison of the Law and Gospel in the passages such as 2Cor. 3:1-18 and Rom. 8:15. "The letter killeth," Calvin comments, "has been distorted and wrongly interpreted ... to the most disastrous error"⁷³ That the letter kills speaks of the Word of God "if ... offered with the mouth only."⁷⁴ Without the *testimonium* the bare Word

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2Cor 3:6, p. 43, vol. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

is indeed “the cause of death.” But once it comes with the *testimonium*, it is “received in the heart” and “life-giving.”⁷⁵

Therefore the distinction between Law and Gospel lies not in the age, nor even in the content, but in the *testimonium*. Law with it can be life-giving whereas Gospel without it kills! Again on Rom. 8:15: “Paul states that there are two spirits. One ... *the spirit of bondage*, which we are able to derive from the Law; and the other, *the spirit of adoption*, which proceeds from the Gospel.”⁷⁶ The results are fear and assurance respectively. Calvin says that the comparison is not between persons in different status, but between two dispensations, or two ministrations: “... a deliberate contrast ... between the literal disciples of the law and believers, whom Christ ... not only addresses with the words of His mouth, but also teaches inwardly and effectually by His Spirit.”⁷⁷ The *testimonium* characterizes the comparison.

The eschatological *testimonium*

Acknowledging that the *testimonium* is the characteristic of the end time, then we can infer that it is eschatological, too. Calvin’s eschatology exhibits its “already-not yet” structure. The best passage for us to observe his doctrine of eschatology will be his *Commentary* on Rom. 13:11-14. The end time spans the two advents of Christ. Since the resurrection of Christ--the true Sun of righteousness--“the rays of heavenly life have begun to shine upon us at the dawn of day.”⁷⁸ De-

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 8:15, p. 168, vol. 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 13:11, p. 286, vol. 8.

spite the fact that the “full light of the sun” is not yet, but from “the first rising of the day” we have already tasted the eschatological glory and also concluded that the full brightness is at hand!⁷⁹

Paul also calls the glory “the firstfruits of the Spirit.” Calvin comments, it is *beginnings*, “a few drops of the Spirit” sprinkled to all believers. No matter how much progress one can make, his measure of the Spirit is “still far from perfection.”⁸⁰ The small portion of the full enjoyment to come renders us assurance of the ultimate salvation. The *testimonium* inherently brings with itself the eschatological dimension.

In conclusion, the necessity of the *testimonium* is demonstrated very clearly in two ways: firstly in the structure of the twofold knowledge of God, it is the epistemological key to usher us into the world of the knowledge of God; secondly, in the structure of the two Covenants of God, it is the dispensational focus to draw us into the light of Christ.

⁷⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 13:12, p. 287, vol. 8.

⁸⁰ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 8:23, p. 175, vol. 8.

Chapter 5

WORD AND SPIRIT

Before we enter into the doctrine of the *testimonium* proper, we have to study its foundation, the doctrine of the Word and Spirit.¹ Calvin discusses the *testimonium* in the *Institutes* 1.7, and the rational proofs (or the *indicia*) of the Scriptures in 1.8. Then in 1.9 he came back to the more basic one--the Word and Spirit, theologically prior to the *testimonium*. It was also developed earlier than the *testimonium*.² The Reformers found that there is a union between the Word and the Spirit. The *testimonium* is but one aspect of the works of that union.³ Meeting the challenges from the Libertines and the papacy, Calvin discovers the invincible weapon, the *testimonium*, in the union.

The Double Structure

Calvin describes the double structure in a vivid way:

¹ Ramm, 17. He says, “The union of Word and Spirit is the theological ground for theology of the *testimonium*.”

² Ramm, 62.

³ Ibid. Here I add that all the redemptive works of the Holy Spirit are worked out of that union. Cf. Battle's note 2 in the *Inst.* 1.7.1.

God works in his elect in two ways: within, through his Spirit; without, through his Word. By his Spirit, illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his Word, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain the same renewal.⁴

All wonders subsist in the harmony of the double structure. Only its union can reveal God's mind and illumine man's heart. When the two factors unite, the knowledge of God "is not only rendered possible to man: it is rendered certain."⁵ Assurance of salvation flows out of this secret union. It is an "inviolable bond,"⁶ because it is joined mutually by the Lord Himself.⁷ So to tear them apart is a "heinous sacrilege."⁸ Calvin observes that there are two kinds of deviation:

Those who are not sufficiently aware of the darkness of the human mind think that faith is formed naturally by *preaching alone*. On the other hand, there are many fanatics who disdain outward preaching and sublimely breathe secret revelations and *enthousiasmous*. But we see that Christ joins these two things together.⁹

For the first case Calvin remarks, "Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing."¹⁰ The malfunction

⁴ *Inst.* 2.5.5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Inst.* 1.9.3.

⁷ *Inst.* 1.9.3.

⁸ *Inst.* 1.9.1.

⁹ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 15:27, p. 110, vol. 5.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

Chapter 5--Word and Spirit

consists not in the Word itself, but in man's blindness and perversity preventing it. Moreover, the letter kills! It means that "if the Word of God is offered with the mouth only, it is the cause of death, for it is life-giving only when it is received with the heart."¹¹ To receive with the heart means to "receive it spiritually, and others will derive death from it."¹² In this way, he complains, many people preach "only in cutting the surface," so it is not "a judicious dispensing of the Word," for it "leaves the inmost pith and marrow untouched."¹³

For the second case Calvin says that "those who do their utmost to deny the doctrine its proper place quench the Spirit," since "the voice of men ... is nothing else but His instrument."¹⁴ Resisting the outward ministry of the Lord's Word is resisting the Spirit. By it, he comments, "It is evident from that how highly God values His Word, and how reverently He wishes us to receive it."¹⁵ Now more clearly we see that the Spirit or the Word never works alone upon the elect. Conversely we will appreciate the double structure more than before.

To make his readers understand how closely the union of the parity is Calvin sought to illustrate it in many metaphors of pairs. If the Word is the *light* of the sun, then the *testimonium* causes you to have new *sight* to see the light, to sense it or to taste it. Light-sight is

¹¹ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2Cor 3:6, p. 43, vol. 10.

¹² Calvin's *Comm.* on John. 6:63, p. 175, vol. 4.

¹³ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2 Tim. 2:15, p. 314, vol. 10.

¹⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 Thess. 5:20, pp. 376, 377, vol. 8.

¹⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 7:51, p. 213, vol. 6.

a pair.¹⁶ The others are root-fruit and hinge-door.¹⁷

Warfield comments correctly that the Word and Spirit is Calvin's formula:

Only in the conjunction of the two can an effective revelation be made to the sin-darkened mind of man. The Word supplies the objective factor; the Spirit the subjective factor; and only in the union of the objective and subjective factors is the result accomplished.¹⁸

This structure only reserves for the elect and only works in his heart. When the Spirit applies God's Word to the reprobate, the case is totally different.¹⁹

An Instrumental Union

The union is not sacramental, nor substantial, but instrumental.²⁰ For "the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers."²¹ The Word plays the objective role in the double structure. Without the cause--the Spirit, who plays the subjective role--the Word cannot do anything. For it is but an instrument without any efficacy. The cause is attributed to the Holy

¹⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.24.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.31, 16.

¹⁸ Warfield, 82-83.

¹⁹ See 23, Calvin on "temporary faith" in chapter three.

²⁰ Dowey, 64. Cf. Warfield, 83.

²¹ *Inst.* 1.9.3. So is the preaching of the Word. See Calvin's *Comm.* on Eph 1:13, p. 131, vol. 11.

Spirit.²² Though the Word is an instrument, it is full of the message of the Lord. Actually it is inspired of God. The Holy Spirit is its author. So He has accordingly stamped His own image --in turn the image of the Lord--in it.²³ Calvin's favorite metaphor--mirror--is also used here to describe how the Word functions instrumentally: "The Word ... is like a mirror in which faith may contemplate God."²⁴

Autopistia

The Word of instrument is also an *autopistic* instrument. That means that the Bible is the Word of God is self-authenticated. It does not need any proofs to assert its authority. God is its sole Author. It is a book inspired by God Himself. "The resident autopistia of Scripture makes it suitable to be the instrument of the Spirit."²⁵ For the authority of the Word comes not from the *testimonium*, but from its *autopistia*.

Ramm indicates that "It is at this point that historic orthodoxy finds a serious fault with the neo-orthodox version of the *testimonium*."²⁶ This deviation is quite subtle. See a Barthian stating his view in this point:

True enough, the Bible has intrinsic validity. *But this does not constitute its authority or even one source of its authority.* The authority derives solely from the inner witness of God himself

²² Calvin's *Comm.* on John 15:3, p. 94, vol. 5.

²³ *Inst.* 1.9.2, and 3.

²⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.6.

²⁵ Ramm, 63.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

through which the intrinsic validity or inherent truth of the sacred oracles is recognized and confirmed.²⁷

In such a view the *testimonium* plays the role of the *autopistia*. Then the authority comes not from the Word objectively, but from the *testimonium* subjectively. Dowey concedes that “The objective revelation is there, or ‘out there’ in Scripture, which is *autopiston*, self-authenticating,”²⁸ but the *autopistia* is not a real one. For for them its authentication depends not upon itself, but only upon the *testimonium*! So it is not strange that neo-orthodoxy feels reluctant to “consider the Bible’s inerrancy an axiom of faith.”²⁹ Therefore the overestimated *testimonium* conversely destroys the double structure of the Word and Spirit. This is “the cleavage between what is called Barthianism and the historic Protestant position.”³⁰

What is Calvin’s position? He says,

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 [*autopiston*]; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.³¹

He distinguishes the *testimonium* from the *autopistia*. The *testimonium* does not provide any authority to the Bible itself at all, though it

²⁷ Dowey, 108. [italics mine]

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dowey, 163.

³⁰ John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. by Paul Woolley, 1946 (Presbyterian & Reformed: Phillipsburg, N.J., 1980), 43.

³¹ *Inst.* 1.7.5.

makes us certain that it is the Word of God through the illumination of the Spirit. “Indeed,” Calvin remarks, “Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”³² The “color” and “taste” of truth have been in the Bible “objectively, inherently and qualitatively”³³ before any subjective *testimonium* senses it.

Having made the distinction of the *testimonium* and the *autopistia*, we will proceed to fathom why the Word of God is self-authenticated. Calvin says, “To assert its authority he [Paul] teaches that it is *inspired of God*.”³⁴ What is the inspiration of God? He continues to explain that it is that “the Law and the prophets ... are *dictated* by the Holy Spirit” or “speaking by God’s *impulse*.”³⁵ Or put in other words, they are *moved* by the Holy Spirit, upon which Calvin comments that it was “only in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit who held sway over their lips as in His own temple.”³⁶ Hence “they faithfully carried out the task imposed on them and upheld the divine Person by their ministry.”³⁷ It is the prophets who wrote down the revelations of God. But they are no more than the instruments. And the prophets are kept by the infallible God from tainting the Word transmitted through them. So the author is God Himself and “we owe to the Scripture the *same* reverence as we owe to God, since it has its

³² *Inst.* 1.7.2.

³³ Murray, 43.

³⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Tim 3:16, pp. 329-330, vol. 10.

³⁵ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Tim 3:16, p. 330, vol. 10. [italics mine]

³⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Pet 1:21, p. 344, vol. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it.”³⁸ “The majesty of God is displayed in it.”³⁹ Therefore Calvin concludes, “the Holy spirit so inheres in His truth⁴⁰ ... Consequently, it is easy to see that the Sacred Scriptures ... breathe something divine.”⁴¹ The inspiration, together with the *autopistia*, is the most original spring of assurance, while the *testimonium* merely plays the role of seal by sealing the authoritative promise to the heart of the elect.

How the Double Structure Works

Calvin proceeds to elaborate how the structure works:

The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed *what had been divinely commanded*.⁴²

The same Spirit speaks the same Word in our hearts! That is the same Spirit who had spoken formerly in the mouths of the prophets.⁴³ That is also the same Word which had been taught to the prophets by the Spirit. He does not come to reveal any new secret, but to persuade the revealed Word. Sometimes the Lord plants “a seed of doctrine” at first, then the Spirit, the internal Teacher shall speak “the same thing.” So the Spirit is “not a constructor of new revelation.”⁴⁴ Calvin de-

³⁸ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Tim 3:16, p. 330, vol. 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 1.9.3.

⁴¹ *Inst.* 1.8.1.

⁴² *Inst.* 1.7.4. [italics mine]

⁴³ Cf. *Inst.* 1.9.3; Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Tim. 3:16, p. 330, vol. 10.

⁴⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 14:25, p. 87, vol. 5.

scribes further:

The role of the Holy Spirit was simply to *establish* Christ's Kingdom and to *maintain* and *confirm* for ever all that the Father had given Him. What then is the purpose of the Spirit's teaching? Not to lead us away from the school of Christ, but rather to *ratify* that voice in which we are commanded to listen to Him [Christ]; otherwise He [the Spirit] would detract from Christ's glory.⁴⁵

All the italicized verbs elucidate the work of the Spirit in the double structure. That is what Warfield comments upon the *Institutes* 1.9.3, "It is not to supersede nor yet to supplement ..., but to confirm them."⁴⁶

In this point the Barthian view of the "ever-recurring act of God ... here and now" is quite cogent.⁴⁷ The Spirit and the Word indeed recur again and again in our hearts what they have done formerly in the prophets. In such a recurring act as this can we see the image of Christ in the Word and God in Christ in turn.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 16:14, p. 121, vol. 5. [italics mine]

⁴⁶ Warfield, 80.

⁴⁷ Murray, 43.

⁴⁸ Niesel, 35.

Chapter 6

TESTMONIUM SPIRITUS SANCTI

Now we come to the *testimonium* itself. For Calvin it is a very important doctrine. Before he enters into his book on faith, i.e. the *Institutes* 3.2, he says, “There is a good reason for the repeated mention of the testimony of the Spirit.” For “the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”¹ According to Dowey Calvin treats it at least in four places in his *Institutes*.² His *Confession*, *Catechism*³ and *New Testament Commentaries* also display his consistent theological thinking on this doctrine. The proposition that “faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit,”⁴ consists in the fact that faith, together with assurance, is the immediate and direct fruit of the *testimonium*. It ushers us into the spiritual world of the benefits of

¹ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

² Dowey, 149-150. namely *Inst.* 1.7, 2.2.18-25, 3.2 and 3.24. Probably a fifth place may be added, 4.14.8-10.

³ I.e. Articles 4 and 11 of *The Geneva Confession* (1536), see *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 27, 29; *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545), see *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

Christ.⁵

A Basic Description

Ramm reflects that the *testimonium* is “a very complex” doctrine. However, it is a tightly-knit one with many facets.⁶ He summarizes it as follows: as to its personal content, it is *Christ*; as to its theological content, it is the *knowledge of God*; as to its subjectivity, it is upon the *consciousness* with assurance; as to its instrumental content, it is the *Word of God*; as to its purpose of God, it characterizes the *New Covenant*.⁷

To describe the *testimonium* in a more analytic way, within the double structure of the Word and Spirit, the objective revelation of the Word works along with the subjective illumination of the Spirit in the mind of the elect at the same time. Logically speaking, its first effect after the illumination *seems* the attestation of the Word of God. Then the Spirit seals particularly the saving promises of the Word of God to man’s heart with the effect of the assurance of salvation. So the logical, not the temporal, nor the experiential, order *seems* thus: the illumination of mind and heart--the attestation of the Word--the assurance of salvation. Or in simpler words, the order is recovering the sight--seeing the light of the Word--seeing the light of the salvation. Or even simpler, sight--then light. But bear in mind: they always come at the same time. Though Calvin usually addresses only one or two elements at one time, others are involved organically. For there is only one *tes-*

⁵ See Calvin’s layout in book three of the *Institutes*.

⁶ Ramm, 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*

timonium in Calvin's mind.

The Theological Titles of the *Testimonium*

The titles in his *Institutes* and *Commentaries* are as copious as his theological insights in this doctrine: the testimony of the Spirit,⁸ or by adding an adjective, such as the secret testimony of the Spirit,⁹ the inward testimony of the Spirit;¹⁰ the secret watering of the Spirit;¹¹ the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit;¹² the Spirit of discernment;¹³ the secret revelation;¹⁴ inner teacher,¹⁵ the Teacher of truth,¹⁶ the perfect Master of Truth;¹⁷ or just simply as the seal,¹⁸ the anointing, and the earnest;¹⁹ spiritual intuition;²⁰ another category being the illumination,²¹ or by adding an adjective, such as the secret illumination of the

⁸ *Inst.* 1.7.4, 5; 3.1.1.

⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.4; Calvin's *Comm.* on John 15:26, p. 110, vol. 5.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.4, 5; Calvin's *Comm.* on John 15:26, 110, vol. 5.

¹¹ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

¹² *Inst.* 1.8.13.

¹³ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

¹⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on Eph 1:17.

¹⁵ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

¹⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 14:17.

¹⁷ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 16:12.

¹⁸ *Inst.* 1.7.4; Calvin's *Comm.* on 2Cor 1:21.

¹⁹ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2Cor 1:21.

²⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.5.

²¹ *Inst.* 1.7.3, 4.

Spirit,²² the special illumination of God,²³ the enlightenment of the Spirit²⁴ the special enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ Calvin assigns a lot of titles to it, because it has many facets in itself. As many names as it has, it is still one entity. The list is not comprehensive, for the doctrine of the *testimonium* appears too frequently in his *Commentaries*.

Is there any rule for Calvin to use these many titles? The general rule is this: he used to call it the formal name, the *testimonium* when he stresses the facet of the attestation, especially in the *Institutes* 1.7; and the illumination of the Spirit, the facet of the certainty, especially in the *Institutes* 3.2.²⁶ But it cannot be misunderstood as there are two *testimonia*. For in rare cases he mixes the usage. For instance, he uses the *testimonium* to treat the doctrine of assurance,²⁷ whereas he uses the illumination or seal to treat the attestation of the Word.²⁸

How Many *Testimonia*?

Some Reformed theologians claim that there are two *testimonia*: one to the attestation of Scripture, another to the certainty of salvation. Their motive is to guard the former one from any taint of religious ex-

²² Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 11:25.

²³ Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 16:17.

²⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 John 2:20.

²⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 Cor 2:10.

²⁶ Dowey, 173-174.

²⁷ *Inst.* 3.1.1; 3.2.41.

²⁸ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

perience.²⁹ But this is a misunderstanding because the illumination of mind must precede either the attestation of Scripture or the assurance of salvation. Once we are illumined to a new keenness or a new taste, religious experiences get involved. The infallibility comes not from our consciousness, but from the divine Word. Just at the very opening words of the section on the *testimonium*, Calvin announces that the authority of Scripture not only prepares our hearts to reverence it, but banishes all doubt.³⁰ Two effects are rooted in the same Word. Again he enumerates Augustine's words to say that "he wants the certainty of the godly to rest upon a far different foundation," which is the authority of the Word.³¹ Hence it is evident there is only one *testimonium* for Calvin.

The singularity of it comes from the unity of the *form* and the *content* of the Word. That is the concept of Calvin concerning the Word of God. Even though there is a form of the twofold knowledge of God as it is displayed in the Bible,³² all the knowledge leads us to only one content: Christ and His salvation. For Calvin Christ is "the center and sum of Scripture."³³ In term of the form of two covenants, he says, "Christ did not first begin to be manifested in the Gospel." All Scriptures, including the old testament, bear witness to Him.³⁴ Ramm infers that

²⁹ Ramm, 99-100.

³⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.1.

³¹ *Inst.* 1.7.3.

³² *Inst.* 1.2.1.

³³ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2 Tim 3:15, p. 329, vol. 10.

³⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 5:39, p. 139, vol. 4.

The thesis that there are two *testimonia* actually calls for a separation of the *form* and the *content* of Scripture. The main burden of the Scripture is to make us wise unto A salvation that is in Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15). In a real sense the Scriptures are the gospel! Revelation at its acme is the gospel! The Word of God is first the gospel!³⁵

Warfield also comments similarly:

The testimony of the Spirit was to him emphatically an operation of the Spirit of God on the heart, which produced distinctively a spiritual effect: it was directed to making men Christians, not to making them theologians.³⁶

Having confirmed that there is only one *testimonium*, a question is still left: whether there is priority between these two effects. From the above discussion it seems that “laying hold of Christ by faith presupposes therefore confidence in the revelation”³⁷ So the accrediting of the Word appears to take priority. But the logical priority may not be the chronological one. Not only that. Rather, they are “logical implicates which involve one another.”³⁸ We had better not be too scholastic on this nuance. We would rather say that once enlightened we have a new sense to taste the sweetness of the Savior as well as to see the truthfulness of Scripture simultaneously.

³⁵ Ramm, 101-102.

³⁶ Warfield, 102.

³⁷ Warfield, 106.

³⁸ Ibid.

Illumination and Sealing

Calvin says, “Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.”³⁹ It initiates the elect into the accrediting of the Word of God and the assurance of salvation. In it there are two dimensions: divine as well as human. His *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* reflects it:

Master: Do we conceive faith of ourselves or do we receive it from God?

Child: *Scripture* teaches that it is the special gift of God, and *experience* confirms this.

Master: Tell what *experience* you mean.

Child: ... But the Holy Spirit by his illumination makes us capable of understanding those things which would otherwise far exceed our grasp, and brings us to a sure persuasion by sealing the promises of salvation in our hearts.⁴⁰

So on the one hand it is a creative work of God, whereas on the other hand, the response of the innermost human consciousness.⁴¹ Now we will explore Calvin’s interpretation of it.

Duality of mind and heart

Calvin has mentioned the duality of mind and heart of the illumination in his formal definition of faith in the *Institutes* 3.2.7. The object in which the Holy Spirit works is not a faculty only, but the total

³⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

⁴⁰ *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 105. [italics mine]

⁴¹ Warfield, 109.

being--mind, affection, will and conscience--involved. He likes to call them mind and heart.⁴² And it seems that he uses heart and will for the most part interchangeably.⁴³ So the Spirit works in both ways--"both in the mind of man is purged so as to be able to taste the truth of God and in that his heart is established therein."⁴⁴ The purge of mind brings new understanding and new endowment of thought. The establishment of heart means confirmation and being furnished with assurance.⁴⁵ Here I make use of illumination and sealing to indicate them respectively. They constitute a duality of one unitary work of the Holy Spirit. Just as we cannot separate light and heat, so also we cannot separate the illumination and the sealing of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, there is for him a logical priority between them. He confesses "that the understanding is ... the leader and governor of the soul; and that the will is always mindful of the bidding of the understanding, and in its own desires awaits the judgment of the understanding." Hence it is natural and understandable for him to say that, "It now remains to pour into the heart itself what the mind has absorbed."⁴⁶ He also says that "to seal up in our hearts those very promises the certainty of which it has previously impressed upon our minds."⁴⁷ So it seems that the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the

⁴² Cf. Calvin's *Comm.* on Heb 4:12, p. 52, vol. 12. Calvin maintains a duality whatever the combination: spirit-soul, intellect-affection, mind-will or mind-heart.

⁴³ Terrance Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards: Art and the Sense of the Heart* (Univ. of Mass.:Amherst, 1980), 7.

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

⁴⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

⁴⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

mind initiates the sealing in the heart.

But on the other hand, as Erdt comments, “Calvin was aware of the danger of rationalism lurking in the unqualified acceptance of faculty psychology.”⁴⁸ So he also underscores the cruciality of the heart. He announces that “firm and steadfast constancy of heart ... is the chief part of faith.”⁴⁹ He also remarks that the power of the Holy Spirit is more manifested in the confirmation of the heart than in the illumination of the mind.⁵⁰ Why? It is just because that, as Calvin himself says, “The heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness;”⁵¹ as much as Erdt comments upon Calvin that, “The fundamental corruption of human nature ... lies in the heart’s being given over to pride.”⁵²

But for the convenience of study, we treat only one of them at each time, yet always bear in mind the other.

The illumination of mind

What is the illumination of mind? Of course it involves the mind of man. But how? “The first degree of advancement in the school of the Lord is to renounce” man’s discernment in order to procure “the

⁴⁷ Ibid. Cf. *Inst.* 1.7.4: “If we turn pure eyes and upright senses toward it, the majesty of God will ... subdue our bold rejection, and compel us to obey.” The order is here, too.

⁴⁸ Erdt, 7.

⁴⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

⁵⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

⁵² Erdt, 8.

support of the Holy Spirit.”⁵³ Only through the support of the Spirit is our mind able to “grasp the mind of Christ.”⁵⁴ However, it is not that the mind, or reason, or man’s intellectual power be rejected or abandoned; and the Christian faith becomes unreasonable and anti-intellectual. It seems so. But the reality is quite different. He says that,

Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees—in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reason⁵⁵

because of the “conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures.”⁵⁶ When he says that it requires no reasons, he means that “we are lifted in mind and heart above our understanding,”⁵⁷ or put in clearer words, it is that God lifts up our minds.⁵⁸ So the truth is that the Lord does not exterminate man’s reason; rather, He redeems it, renews it, recovers it and raises it. This is the illumination of mind.

The sealing of heart

The corrupted heart must be renewed as much as the mind must be illumined. As a matter of fact our heart is renewed in order to be

⁵³ *Inst.* 3.2.34. As to the necessity of the illumination, please see *The Necessity of the Testimonium* in chapter 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 1.7.5. Cf. 1.7.4: “more excellent than all reason.”

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

⁵⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.4.

⁵⁸ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 1 Cor 2:10, p. 58, vol. 9.

sealed with the promises of God by the Holy Spirit while our mind is illumined. Originally our heart is as hard as a stone, full of obstinacy; hence, nothing, including the Law of God, can be inscribed on it.⁵⁹ Not merely so, it but wages war on God!⁶⁰ By God's grace alone the sinner is converted. How does He dispense His grace? He begins with the demonstration of sin--"the corruptions and depravity of human nature," "the material of sin," and the sin reigning in the world.⁶¹ Thus the Spirit rebukes us,⁶² and accordingly accuses our conscience before God.⁶³ All these works just lay low our stubborn will and finally bring it to death!⁶⁴

However, this death does not mean eradication as much as the rejection of reason by God does not mean extermination. God won't leave it in a state of suspense.⁶⁵ So He turns men from being unwilling and reluctant into being willing.⁶⁶ Then our heart is drawn to embrace Christ and His gospel.⁶⁷ Calvin also describes it as softening the heart from a stony one into a flexible one. This is also called the doctrine of regeneration.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Calvin's *Comm.* on Ezek 11:19, p. 375, vol. 11.

⁶⁰ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 9:5, p. 258, vol. 6.

⁶¹ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 16:8, p. 117, vol. 5.

⁶² Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 9:6, p. 261, vol. 6.

⁶³ Calvin's *Comm.* on Heb 4:12, p. 51, vol. 12.

⁶⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on Heb 4:12, p. 50, vol. 12.

⁶⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 6:45, p. 165, vol. 4.

⁶⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 6:44, p. 164, vol. 4.

⁶⁷ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 16:14, p. 73, vol. 7.

⁶⁸ Calvin's *Comm.* on Ezek 11:19, pp. 372-374, vol. 11.

No sooner is the heart renewed by the inward testimony of the Spirit than it is sealed with the Word of God.⁶⁹ Especially it is sealed with the benefits of Christ--His cleansing and sacrifice.⁷⁰ The sealing of heart goes side by side with the illumination of mind. This whole transformation of our mind and heart is Calvin's doctrine of the illumination. The renewed faculty is prepared by God to receive the infallible assurance from the Holy Spirit.

The new spiritual sense

Now we will appreciate a marvelous theological contribution of Calvin--the experiential doctrine of the sense of heart⁷¹ which he employs to elucidate the human dimension of the *testimonium*. It is an integration of divine understanding and holy affection in the union of human mind and heart. Calvin calls it "the practical knowledge" because it is more certain and firmer knowledge on the one hand, and feeling and touches in the presence of God, on the other;⁷² or "the sure experience of godliness" because it is the taste of the divinity of Scriptures.⁷³ In turn it naturally becomes the source of doubtless assurance. Calvin says,

But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts be-

⁶⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

⁷⁰ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

⁷¹ Calvin does not use the term, "the sense of the heart," but it is implied. He once categorizes sense under understanding (*Inst.* 1.15.7). But obviously the new sense is inseparably the sense of the heart.

⁷² *Inst.* 1.13.13.

⁷³ *Inst.* 1.13.14.

yond doubt God's goodness clearly manifested for us. But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves.⁷⁴

Erdt comments, "Possession of the sense of the heart constitutes the assurance of election."⁷⁵ It may explain why Calvin cherishes the doctrine of the sense of the heart.

The concept of the new sense, together with its related lexicons, such as taste, sweetness, seeing, touching, feeling and so forth, did provide the inspiration and pave the way for latter Puritans, especially Jonathan Edwards, to develop their theology of the religious affections.

In illumination the Spirit raises the mind to a higher place than before. Then it supernaturally exerts an upright sense, or a new spiritual sense, to make believers to see God's glory in nature or in grace.⁷⁶ This is a drastic change. Once blind, but now I see. Essentially this is what the present-day evangelicals call the doctrine of "regeneration."⁷⁷ Calvin likes to use such senses as eyes, ears, or tongue to describe how the new sense works: with new eyes we can understand the gospel and receive it,⁷⁸ or know God and His calling,⁷⁹ or perceive the glory of God, or acknowledge Jesus is the Redeemer,⁸⁰ or

⁷⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.15.

⁷⁵ Erdt, 13.

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.24; 1.7.5; Calvin's *Comm.* on John 16:24, p. 128, vol. 5.

⁷⁷ Warfield, 102-103.

⁷⁸ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 16:14, p. 73, vol. 7; 2Cor 4:6, p. 57, vol. 10.

⁷⁹ Calvin's *Comm.* on Eph 1:17, p. 134, vol. 11.

⁸⁰ Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 13:16, p. 68, vol. 2.

see the kingdom of God,⁸¹ or contemplate the heavenly mysteries with a new keenness,⁸² or enjoy the sight of God in heaven;⁸³ with new ears we can discriminate between the truth of God and the men's false inventions,⁸⁴ or hear the effectual calling of God;⁸⁵ with a new touch we can feel the very presence of God in our quickening, illumination, perseverance, justification and sanctification;⁸⁶ and with new tongues we can be aroused to taste the divine goodness, to ravish ourselves in the abundant sweetness, and even to be admitted into the most hidden treasures of God as well as the most hallowed precincts of his Kingdom.⁸⁷ Warfield gives us a very concise summary about it:

As we have implanted in us by nature a sense which distinguishes between light and darkness, a sense which distinguishes between sweet and bitter, and the verdict of these senses is immediate and final; so we have implanted in us by the creative action of the Holy Spirit a sense for the divine, and its verdict, too, is immediate and final: the spiritual man discerneth all things. Such, in briefest outline, is Calvin's famous doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit.⁸⁸

Highly experiential as the assurance is, it is certain because of its im-

⁸¹ Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 11:27, p. 24, vol. 2.

⁸² *Inst.* 3.2.34.

⁸³ Calvin's *Comm.* on Matt 5:8, p. 172, vol. 1.

⁸⁴ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 10:4, p. 260, vol. 5.

⁸⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on John 10:27, p. 272, vol. 5.

⁸⁶ *Inst.* 1.13.13.

⁸⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.41.

⁸⁸ Warfield, 79.

mediacy and finality. For it comes from the Spirit and is brought in through the new sense which is far above the formerly fallible mind.

Persuasion

Calvin further interprets the new sense in terms of the passive *persuasion* and the active *intuition*. Persuasion means that you are passively persuaded by a wise teacher in a very tender way. Calvin says that “credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author.”⁸⁹ In another place he says, “His Spirit testifying may persuade our hearts that we are the children of God.”⁹⁰ Hence persuasion covers both effects of the *testimonium*. The Inner Teacher patiently instills His light of wisdom into our mind by and by. So in this sense the illumination of the Spirit progresses in degrees. Calvin talks about the commencement and the completion of faith,⁹¹ or the first illumination and degrees of faith.⁹² As long as He persuades, the elect continually advance until the true knowledge of God fills his new sense! To be persuaded means to be taught by God. The only source of knowing Christ is the Scriptures.⁹³ The persuasive Teacher of Truth is none other than the Holy Spirit, the tender Comforter.⁹⁴

But Calvin also stresses, on the other hand, that the effect of per-

⁸⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 3.13.4.

⁹¹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Eph 1:13, p. 132, vol. 11.

⁹² Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 14:23, p. 86, vol. 5.

⁹³ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 5:39, p. 139, vol. 4.

⁹⁴ See Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 14:17; 16:12; *Inst.* 3.1.4.*

suation is not so much tender as it pierces the depth of mind as well as penetrates into the deep things of salvation. The reason the Perfect Master of Truth can persuade us is just because a new sense is being formed in us. There is a new faculty to which He can communicate. Nevertheless, it does not mean that He leaves alone our dullness, darkness and stubbornness of mind. Paul's conversion is a typical story. The Lord tamed him suddenly by crushing his pride and stubbornness, but at the same time He overwhelms him with the direct awareness of His glory and pierces his mind with the heavenly calling.⁹⁵ During the process of persuasion Calvin even insist that the elect "must be deeply wounded"⁹⁶ that the Word can penetrate into the depths of the heart. Our mind cannot be renewed "until our old man has been slain by the edge of his sword of the Spirit."⁹⁷ Calvin reminds that it is not a Law-work, but "a kind of killing that makes alive that happens through the Gospel."⁹⁸ Without this being laid low and the destruction of carnal wisdom, an efficacious persuasion will not happen. In the process of the passive persuasion the elect keep being taught by the Inner Teacher until certainty is founded upon it.⁹⁹

Intuition

But on the other hand, the new sense is also a spiritual intuition. It is not a discursive reasoning, but a direct apprehension of the divine

⁹⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on Acts 9:1-4, pp. 256-258, vol. 6.

⁹⁶ Calvin's *Comm.* on Heb 4:12, p. 50, vol. 12.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Calvin's *Comm.* on Heb 4:12, p. 51, vol. 12.

⁹⁹ *Inst.* 1.8.13.

knowledge.¹⁰⁰ Intuition is the very distinctive nature of the new sense. Calvin says, “If we turn eyes and upright senses toward it, the majesty of God will immediately come to view ...”¹⁰¹ This is intuition through seeing. It is irreducible and immediate. When questioned about the certainty of the Word, he appeals to the intuition of the new sense by saying:

Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their *taste*.¹⁰²

Intuition finalizes everything. It cannot be reduced, because it is the most basic and simple thing. The object of the senses--God, the Scriptures or salvation--can register its reality and certainty to the renewed faculty without any bias. Therefore intuition is the epistemological way of the sense of the heart. Certainty has been inherent in it.

Calvin on Rom. 8:15-16

These two verses are the Puritans’ favorite passage upon which they primarily built their theology of assurance. How does Calvin treat it exegetically? How many witnesses are in this passage is the crucial point. Calvin says,

The Spirit of adoption, who seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts [Rom. 8:16], raises up our spirits to dare show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings, and confi-

¹⁰⁰ Ramm, 84.

¹⁰¹ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

¹⁰² *Inst.* 1.7.2.

dently cry, “Abba, Father!” [Rom. 8:15].¹⁰³

Note the logical order of these two verses in Calvin’s mind. It means that the *testimonium* of 8:16 precedes the cry of 8:15. Only through the Spirit may we cry, “Abba, Father!”¹⁰⁴ So he judges it is a witness *to* our spirit rather *with* our spirit.¹⁰⁵ He is consistent in this point both in his *Comm.* on Rom. 8:15-16 and its corresponding passage, Gal. 4:6, and everywhere he quotes them in his *Institutes*.¹⁰⁶ So there is only one witness for Calvin, despite both the divine and the human dimension.¹⁰⁷ There are two subjects--we and the Spirit--crying “Abba, Father!” in Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6, but Calvin made no difference between them. For him it is only one joint cry. The crying spirit is the new sense of the heart,¹⁰⁸ and the bold cry is the sign of assurance which is only for the elect.¹⁰⁹

The Attestation of Scriptures

Once we are illumined, we are endowed with the new sense to

¹⁰³ *Inst.* 3.20.1.

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 3.20.37.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Rom 8:16, p. 170, vol. 8.

¹⁰⁶ On Rom. 8:15-16 see *Inst.* 3.2.39; 3.13.4.; 3.20.1, 37. On Gal. 4:6 see *Inst.* 2.14.5; 3.1.3; 3.2.11, 12; 3.13.5; 3.20.37.

¹⁰⁷ This view is distinctive from Warfield’s. Warfield’s interpretation of Calvin is thus: “This particular point is nowhere discussed by him at large, but Calvin’s general sense is perfectly plain. That there is a double testimony he is very sure--the testimony of our own spirit and that of the Holy Spirit.” But Warfield also says, “This double testimony runs confluent together into one.” Warfield, 110.

¹⁰⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.39.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Gal 4:6, p. 75, vol. 11.

taste the glory of the divine objects. There are two effects of the *testimonium*: the attestation of Scriptures and the assurance of salvation.

What is the attestation of the Word? Calvin says, “Credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author.”¹¹⁰ Hence the accrediting of the Word comes from the persuasion of God being its Author. How do we know it? For we have new eyes and when we are drawn to turn them to the Word, we can see manifest signs of God speaking in Scripture so as to know that its teaching is from above.¹¹¹ What are the signs? When we turn our upright senses to it, “the majesty of God will immediately come to view”;¹¹² and we do “feel that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there.”¹¹³ The Word is the mirror of God in which we can see God. So Calvin thought, “We owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God.”¹¹⁴ It should not be misunderstood as the Bible becoming a paper pope! It but means that we are convinced, through the illumination, that God is the author of the Word.

Now a question is proposed: since the knowledge of God is two-fold, is it necessary for the elect to know God not only as Redeemer but also as Creator to be saved?¹¹⁵ The answer is definitely yes. For true religion presupposes the persuasion that God is the Creator of the

¹¹⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Inst.* 1.7.5.

¹¹⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on 2 Tim 3:16, p. 330, vol. 10.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Inst.* 1.6.1. where he stresses the Redeemer.

world.¹¹⁶ So to be sealed only with the certainty of the knowledge of God the Redeemer regardless of that of God the Creator is illegitimate. To be assured of the divinity of the Word implies the whole revelation of God. Then out of the knowledge of the true God in the mirror of the Word flows the infallible certainty of the Word and in turn that of salvation.

The Assurance of Salvation

As I have mentioned above, for Calvin, assurance is the essence of faith. This is the natural result of his doctrine of the *testimonium*. From the last section we see that the attestation of the Word is logically the first effect of the *testimonium*. The Holy Spirit indeed seals the certainty of the Word of God to our heart so that we know God is our Redeemer.¹¹⁷ The seal of the assurance of salvation is the ultimate purpose of the *testimonium*. So the Spirit seals specifically the sacrifice of Christ and its cleansing to our heart¹¹⁸ so that we are assured our sins are pardoned.

On the one hand Calvin stresses the experiential side of it, so he thought that the new sense of heart, when persuaded by the Holy Spirit, can taste the sweetness of salvation in an intuitive way. By appealing to how the knowledge is procured through persuasion and intuition, then he avers that the knowledge is absolutely certain. But on the other hand, he rather approaches it more objectively by saying that “To sum up: Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of his

¹¹⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on Heb 11:3, p. 159, vol. 12.

¹¹⁷ *Inst.* 1.2.1; 1.6.1.

¹¹⁸ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

Spirit, at the time so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every good.”¹¹⁹ Union with Christ comes to the fore. Then we can partake of every goodness in Christ. The goodness includes not only the negative pardon of sins, but also the positive ones, such as the adoption of God, the recovering of the image of God in us and so on. To elaborate on it Calvin uses some metaphors, such as seal, anointing, pledge, earnest and first-fruits to explicate the richness of the doctrine.

Indicia

Finally we have to examine Calvin’s view on rational proofs of the Word to complete his system of the doctrine of the *testimonium*. It is evident that to attain the certainty of the Word the rational proofs (*indicia*) take no place at all.¹²⁰ But Calvin does not say that they make no contribution at all. In the *Institutes* 1.8 he discusses the doctrine of *indicia*. It is of much more importance in such a rational and scientific age as today. This doctrine displays Calvin’s position on rational apologetics.

In the *Institutes* 1.8.2-11 Calvin enumerated ten *indicia*. Right in the beginning he confirmed that “once we have embraced it [the *testimonium*] devoutly as its dignity deserves, ... those arguments ... become very useful aids.”¹²¹ Why does our Lord ordain such an aid as *indicia*? Just because of our weakness and feebleness, He adds some extra helps to show His consideration!¹²² In which way does the *indi-*

¹¹⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.35. So is in Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 17:3, p. 136, vol. 5.

¹²⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

¹²¹ *Inst.* 1.8.1. Also see 1.8.13, Following the *testimonium*, the *indicia* will help.

¹²² *Inst.* 1.8.2, 13.

cia act as aid to the believers? It can “further strengthening what has been conceived by the Word”¹²³ and can help the backslider to recover his sense of the heart.¹²⁴

Calvin also judged that “But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly”¹²⁵ However, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the *indicia* can help man give greater reverence to the word of God,¹²⁶ and prepare man for faith.¹²⁷

These are the two incidental aids of the *indicia*.

¹²³ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 3:2, p. 62, vol. 4. So the Lord appeared suddenly among the disciples, for He wanted to confirm the authority of His resurrection by a striking miracle; see *Comm.* on John 20:19-20. So the multitude of fishes made John and others recognize the Lord; see *Comm.* on John 21:7. The Gospel of John is another Calvin’s book of *indicia*. He discussed the doctrine of *indicia* in six cases: John 3:2; 20:5, 19-20, 27, 31 and 21:7.

¹²⁴ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:27, 209, vol. 5. So the Lord answered Thomas’ “wrong request” to touch His wounds.

¹²⁵ *Inst.* 1.8.13. So a sight of the slough alone still leaves John and Peter in uncertainty and perplexity. The “faith” of John in 20:8, according to Calvin, just denotes “the progress of faith,” and is “still far from the pure and clear knowledge of faith;” see *Comm.* on John 20:5-8.

¹²⁶ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 20:31, p. 213, vol. 5.

¹²⁷ Calvin’s *Comm.* on John 3:2, p. 62, vol. 4. So the miracles help Nicodemus know that Jesus is a prophet, though not the Messiah.

Chapter 7

SYLLOGIMUS PRACTICUS

Syllogimus practicus may well be the most debated aspect in the controversy concerning assurance. What is a *syllogismus practicus*, or practical syllogism? It is basically a syllogism, involving major, minor premises and a logical conclusion drawn from them. “As for the syllogism itself, the orthodox Reformed clearly state that the major must be read in Scripture, the external Word, and that the minor, the internal Word of the Spirit, must be *read* in the heart.”¹ A *syllogismus practicus* is a logical tool used by the Reformed in order to establish the assurance of salvation. The major premise is found in the Word of God, especially 1 John 3:14, 19 or 2 Pet. 1: 10. The minor premise is the moral practice. Man’s conscience is the court where his practice is judged and then assurance is drawn. For instance, taking 1 John 3: 14a as the major premise. The Scripture reads, “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” Then the minor premise is a witness and judgment in the court of conscience. Do I love my brethren? Do I love them “in deed and in truth” by giving them my goods? My conscience will give me a judgment. If it

¹ Recharad A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, 293.

affirms, then I have assurance before God.

Did Calvin reject it or endorse it? Puritan scholars tend to say that Calvin endorsed it, while some Reformation scholars hold the contrary view. Calvin himself was not ignorant of the fundamental issue. On the contrary, in the context of Roman Catholic teaching he was well-informed of it and had much concern for it. His teaching, while worded with meticulous care, is not unequivocal.

Sola Fide

As a proponent of *Sola Fide*, Calvin would not yield one inch for good works as the ground of our confidence and comfort of salvation:

Under God's judgment we must not put any trust in works, or glory in any esteem of them. The agreement lies in this: that the saints, when it is a question of the *founding* and *establishing* of their own salvation, without regard for works turn their eyes sorely to God's goodness. Not only ... as to the *beginning* ... but ... the *fulfillment*²

Obviously he cuts off any avenue in praise of human works, whether in the incipient stage of grace or the ensuing one. But right after rejecting good works as the ground of salvation, he continues in the same section of the *Institutes*:

A conscience so founded, erected, and established is established also in the consideration of works, so far, that is, as these are *testimonies* of God dwelling and ruling in us. Inasmuch, therefore, as this reliance upon works has no place *unless you first cast the*

² *Inst.* 3.14.18. [italics mine]

*whole confidence of your mind upon God's mercy, it ought not seem contrary to that upon which it depends.*³

Why does Calvin “rule out reliance upon works” at first and then “not forbid ... from undergirding and strengthening this faith by *signs* of the divine benevolence” in the same section?⁴

Inferior aid

We should pay attention to the distinction between *cause, or foundation* and *sign, testimony, confirmation, illustration, fruit or evidence* of salvation in Calvin's mind.⁵ He guards against any works being viewed as a cause of salvation, whereas he allows or even encourages some good works as evidences of it.

He indicates the priorities of the sources of assurance:

We only know that we are God's children by His *sealing* His free adoption on our hearts by His Spirit and by our receiving by faith the sure *pledge* of it offered in Christ. Therefore, love is an *accessory or inferior aid, a prop to our faith*, not the foundation on which it rests.⁶

³ Ibid. [italics mine]

⁴ Ibid. See also 3.14.19: “they cannot do even this [which is taking good conscience as proof] *unless* they first apprehend God's goodness, sealed by nothing else than the certainty of the promise.” [italics mine]

⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 John 3:14, 275, vol. 5: cause vs sign, testimony; *Inst.* 3.21.7: testimony, sign, mark; *Inst.* 3.14.18: sign, testimony, sign; *Inst.* 3.6.1 and 3.15.8 on 1Pet 1:10: confirmation, fruit; *Comm.* on 1Pet 1:10, 334, vol.12 : foundation vs confirmation, illustration, evidence. [italics mine]

⁶ *Calvin's Comm.* on 1 John 3:19, p. 278, vol.5. Cf. *Inst.* 3.14. 21, a paragraph on causes in which we see “works as inferior cause”; 3.14.19: “... uprightness and sim-

Here he mentions three sources of assurance: *sealing*, *pledge* and *good works* (which is signified as love). This group corresponds to that group mentioned in *WCF* 18:2: *promises, inward evidence, testimony of the Spirit*. The inward evidence in *WCF* 18:2, complemented with the good works in *WCF* 16:2, forms the *sylogismus practicus*. Note, however, that the orders are different. The promises in the Word of God, the cornerstone of assurance, are first in both. However, the later Puritans, due to perhaps increased pastoral and practical considerations, put the evidences of grace before the sealing of the Holy Spirit, but not in the sense of priority. Calvin, on the other hand, deliberately puts the reflected evidences last so that he can contrast the superiority of God's work with the inferiority of man's sanctification or good works.

Wilhelm Niesel, after he has reviewed all the passages on it in Calvin's *Institutes* and his *Commentaries*, argues that "nowhere does Calvin teach the *sylogismus practicus*".⁷ He states that "only if we fail to read carefully what Calvin writes at this point, or tear sentences from their context, can we assert he is here expounding the doctrine that our works serve to confirm us in the assurance of salvation."⁸ But if we read Niesel's arguments very carefully, we will find what he objects to is and a *a priori* use of *sylogismus practicus*, not an *a posteriori* one. For he concedes that "our works can come into consideration on-

plicity ... have no place in laying a foundation to strengthen the conscience but are of value only taken *a posteriori*." He also mentions these three sources in this paragraph. [Italics mine]

⁷ Niesel, 178. These passages are *Inst.* 3.14.18-20 and Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 John 3:14, 19, pp. 275-276, 278, vol. 5; and 2 Pet 1:10, pp. 333-335, vol. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

ly in a subordinate sense”⁹ He comments that “The works, as indications that we are in a state of grace, do not possess the same weight as the word of promise, but they can be added after the Word has already fulfilled its task.”¹⁰ Niesel clarifies that the inferiority of the *syllogismus practicus* consists in its total subordination to the Word. Hence I do not see any substantial contradiction between the interpretation of Ronald S. Wallace¹¹ and that of Niesel.

Why Inferior?

Why are the good works but an *inferior* aid? Because, even though all good fruits are wrought by the grace of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and hence are a sign of being in the state of grace, yet “the saints are conscious of possessing only such an integrity as intermingled with many vestiges of the flesh.”¹² The assurance from our good conscience cannot be an *infallible* assurance, but only a *fallible* one. It cannot stand alone, but must go together with the absolute security of the promise of God which is sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Following Augustine, Calvin says, “these [good works] are also overwhelmed by a multitude of sins. From this it comes about that his

⁹ Ibid., 173. Cf. 176. According to Niesel, this subordination does not at all mean that the *syllogismus practicus* will share a smaller percentage credits of our assurance. It but means that it serves only in subordination to the Word of God when the latter provides the full credits of our assurance. His arguments helps us to know the *via media* (see below) of Calvin.

¹⁰ Ibid., 174

¹¹ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 301-303. He states that the evidence of good works can function as a help to assurance.

¹² *Inst.* 3.14.19.

conscience feels more fear and consternation than assurance.”¹³ Actually Calvin’s stance was already clearly and concisely stated in Article Ten of the *Geneva Confession* (1536) under the title of “All our Good in the Grace of God”:

In order that all glory and praise be rendered to God (as is his due), and that we be able to have true peace and rest of conscience, we understand and confess that we receive all benefits from God, as said above, by his clemency and pity, without any consideration of our worthiness or the merit of our works, to which is due no other retribution than eternal confusion. None the less our Saviour in his goodness, having received us into the communion of his son Jesus, regards the works that we have done in faith as pleasing and agreeable; not that they merit it at all, but because, not imputing any of the imperfection that is there, he acknowledges in them nothing but what proceeds from his Spirit.¹⁴

All elements of his later arguments concerning this doctrine are included in this early statement.

This is really “a more plausible argument.” For the Purpose of clarification, Calvin the good teacher provides an illustration:

For example, when we enjoy the light, we are sure the sun is shining. If the sun actually shines on the place where we are, we see it more clearly. But even when the visible rays do not reach us, we are satisfied that the sun diffuses the benefit of its bright-

¹³ *Inst.* 3.14.20.

¹⁴ *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 28-29.

ness to us. So when faith has been founded on Christ, some things can happen to *help* it; but yet it rests on Christ's grace *alone*.¹⁵

Via Media

Three positions have been adopted with respect to the debate over the *syllogismus practicus*: rejecting it, embracing it, and accepting it with conditions as well as reservations. Obviously Calvin stood in the *via media*. His consistency in this position could be exhibited in his exposition on 2 Peter 1:10 which Kendall calls the Puritan's banner, following the Beza-Perkins tradition.¹⁶ Calvin notes in his *Commentary* that there is a question arising in this verse, "whether the stability of our calling and election depends on good works." Conceding that it seems so, he argues that "on the other hand the unanimous teaching of Scripture is that our election is founded first and foremost on the eternal decree of God. And that our calling is ... begun and perfected by His gratuitous goodness." The cause is evidently the grace of God. Provided believers make sure that "the foundation of our salvation is certainly not placed in ourselves, and its cause is assuredly outside us," then "those who prove that their calling is sure by their good works are in no danger of falling." He concludes:

Peter is *encouraging* those who *feel* the effective working of the Spirit in *themselves* to be of good heart for the future, because the Lord has laid in them the sure foundation of a true and certain

¹⁵ Calvin's *Comm.* on 1 John 3:14, p. 276, vol.5. [italics mine] Cf. *Inst.* 3.14.18.

¹⁶ R. T. Kendall, "The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology" in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. S. Reid, 205.

calling.¹⁷

Besides his *Commentary* there are two places in the *Institutes* where Calvin treats 2 Pet. 1:10.¹⁸ In the treatise on Christian life (*Institutes* 3.6-10) Calvin chooses 2 Peter 1:10 as a reference text to Galatians 4: 5, and states that

The object of regeneration ... is to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons.¹⁹

Christian obedience is to manifest and confirm our adoption which is endowed in regeneration. So in our living we can by God's grace confirm our adoption. Good works can by no means bring salvation to us. But once we are saved, it is a practical prop to assurance. The Christian life as a whole is graced with the role of the *syllogismus practicus*. This reveals Calvin's *via media* toward life and works.

The last time Calvin mentions 2 Peter 1: 10 is in *Institutes* 3.15.8. The context is his book of justification by faith (3.11-18). But for the need of consolation, he appeals to many wonderful passages. In the end, he concludes, we are consoled by the fact of new creation, and moreover, of new realm of righteousness:

They pass from the realm of sin into the realm of righteousness; ... by this testimony they confirm their calling [2 Peter 1: 10], and, like trees, are judged by their fruits [Matt. 7: 20; 12: 33; Luke 6:

¹⁷ Calvin's *Comm.* on 2 Pet 1:10, pp. 334-335, vol, 12. [italics mine]

¹⁸ I.e. *Inst.* 3.6.1; 3.15.8.

¹⁹ *Inst.* 3.6.1.

44].²⁰

Good works is not reliable for our justification before God. But once born again, it can confirm and testify our faith, just as fruits do to their tree. Again we see Calvin's *via media* position in *syllogismus practicus*.

So far we have examined Calvin's doctrine of assurance in much details. The heart of it is the doctrine of the *testimonium*. With *testimonium* Calvin consistently and elegantly justifies his position in the doctrine of assurance: assurance is the essence of faith. In this chapter we also exam that he does not jettison the *syllogismus practicus*. His takes the *via media* in this regard. I will hold my final conclusion until I compare Calvin with *the Westminster Confession of Faith*.

²⁰ *Inst.* 3.15.8.

Conclusion

THE *WCF* VS. CALVIN ON ASSURANCE

In chapter 2 we find that for Calvin faith and assurance are synonyms. Actually their synonymity comes from his doctrine of the *testimonium*. Hence the difference between the *WCF* and Calvin on the doctrine of assurance can be primarily traced to their distinctions on the doctrine of the *testimonium*. A conclusion upon this case--the *WCF* vs. Calvin on assurance--had better not be made until another case--the *WCF* vs. Calvin on the *testimonium*--is reviewed. Concerning the latter case Warfield judges,

It [Calvin's doctrine of *testimonium*] is incorporated into the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) in perhaps the best and most balanced statement it has ever received--the phraseology of which is obviously derived in large part from Calvin¹

Let us prove Warfield's judgment.

The Structure of the *WCF*'s *Testimonium*

As I mentioned above, the structure of Calvin's systematic theol-

¹ Warfield, 126.

ogy can be well interpreted by that of the twofold knowledge of God.² Then we will inquire what the theological structure of the *WCF* is.

Duplex cognitio Dei in the *WCF*

Concerning the structure of the *WCF*, Warfield indicates the following in terms of the federal theology:

The architectonic principle of the *Westminster Confession* is supplied by the schematization of the Federal theology, The matter is distributed into thirty-three comprehensive chapters. After an opening chapter “Of the Holy Scripture” as the source of divine truth ... there are successively taken up the topics of God and the Trinity, ... and then God’s Covenant with Man, and Christ the Mediator of the Covenant, while subsequent treatment is given to the stages in the *ordo salutis* in the order first of the benefits conferred under the Covenant (Vocation, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification) ... and then of the duties required under the Covenant (Faith, Repentance, Good Works, Perseverance, Assurance)³

According to Warfield, two chapters in the *WCF* are crucial to the scheme, namely, the first and tenth chapters. The opening chapter on the Holy Scripture leads us to know the sovereign God who alone is the source of covenants. The tenth chapter on effectual calling leads us to appropriate the benefits of the covenant of grace.⁴

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (1908), 56-57.

⁴ Also see LC 58, 59, 67; SC 29-31. The divines deliberately put the *testimonium* in a very critical position in the catechism.

But the scheme can be also interpreted by Calvin's twofold knowledge of God. The first chapter of the *WCF* ushers us into the knowledge of God both as the Creator and as the Redeemer, while the tenth, into the saving knowledge of God the Redeemer. Notice that *WCF* 1:5 and 10:1 are two epistemological keys to their corresponding realms of the knowledge of God respectively.⁵ The divines put into confessional formulation in these two sections the testimonial activity of the Holy Spirit in the attestation of Scripture as well as in the assurance of salvation. So the covenantal scheme of the *WCF* is still compatible with the epistemological scheme of Calvin.

Word and Spirit in the *WCF*

Then I will check whether there is still the doctrine of Word and Spirit in the *WCF* and how it is. The divines taught that the Word is autopistian: "The authority of the Holy Scripture ... dependeth ... wholly upon God." He is the author. So "it ought to be believed, and obeyed."⁶ The *WCF* makes a clear difference between the objective *autopiston* and the subjective *testimonium*.⁷ Though "our full persuasion and assurance" of the Word comes from the inner spiritual experience, yet its authority is found only in the external Word. They cannot be obscured or confused.

How is the autopistian Word applied to man? It works only in a

⁵ *WCF* 1:5 speaks of the *testimonium* in attestation of Scripture in us so that we are endowed with the knowledge of God, while *WCF* 10:1, in illumination of our mind and sealing of our heart so that we are furnished with the saving knowledge of the Redeemer.

⁶ *WCF* 1:4.

⁷ *WCF* 1:4, 5.

double structure of Word and Spirit for the elect.⁸ The Holy Spirit works inwardly in our hearts, not to arouse religious affections only, but mainly to persuade us of the full authority of the Word.⁹ It is God Himself speaking with authority in His Word.¹⁰ The speaking God, the Holy Spirit, in the preaching ministry of the Word is the *same* God, the original author of it. Similarly the Word is the ordinary means of which the Spirit makes use.¹¹ So the Word of which the Spirit ordinarily makes use to reveal His will is the *same* Word which He originally inspired. According to the *WCF* the *testimonium* and its aftermath applications of redemption--such as saving faith and sanctification--are wrought in this structure.¹² In summary, I find that the theological structure of Calvin--the twofold knowledge of God and the double structure of Word and Spirit--still holds good in the *WCF*! That is very important. Within this structure is the *testimonium* able to operate with its natural fruit of the doctrine of assurance and faith.

The Doctrine of the *WCF*'s *Testimonium*

It is stated in *WCF* 1:1 that though there is a manifestation of God through nature¹³, there is also a need of a knowledge of God "which is

⁸ *WCF* 1:5; 8:8; 10:1; 13:1 and 14:1.

⁹ *WCF* 1:5.

¹⁰ *WCF* 14:2.

¹¹ *WCF* 14:2 and 18:3. *WCF* 10:3 mentions the effectual calling which is not by the means of the ministry of the Word.

¹² See note 5.

¹³ Also see *WCF* 1:6; 21:1. Obviously the Westminster divines had a very high view of "the light of nature." The light is so strong that man will have an impetus to worship God the Creator. However, it is not accepted by God due to man's sin.

necessary unto salvation.” Because man failed, the light of nature can only leave man unexcusable, and hence the Word of God appears necessary.

Then how does the *WCF* interpret the work of the necessary *testimonium*? Naturally flowing from the structure of Word and Spirit is the illumination of the Spirit which is the essence of the *testimonium*. The *WCF* describes the illumination of the Spirit as:

Enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, ... effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Man’s mind, will and heart are all involved. So it is a highly sensible experience. Though usually only one aspect of the *testimonium*--the illumination of mind or the sealing of heart--is mentioned, yet a total transformation of the whole being is always implied. It is the reality of the new covenant.

Once our sight is illumined, then we can see the double light--the light of Scriptures and that of salvation. They are the double effects of the same *testimonium*--the attestation of Scriptures and the assurance of salvation. For the *WCF* there is only one *testimonium*.¹⁵ Hence it is

¹⁴ *WCF* 10:1.

¹⁵ The attestation of the Word is mentioned in *WCF* 1:5. The assurance of salvation, in *WCF* 1:6; 3:8; 12:1 and 18:2. Observe these facts: (1) The wording--”the Holy Spirit bearing witness” in *WCF* 1:5 is reminiscent of Rom. 8:15-16 upon which *WCF* 18:2 is based, though the Scriptures are not mentioned in its Scripture proofs. (2) The only Scripture quoted by both sides in their Scripture proofs--i.e. *WCF* 1:5 and 1:6--is 1 Cor 2:10-12. (3) The *WCF* witnessed only one experience of the *testimonium*, that of effectual calling. It is wrought through the ministry of the Word. Cf.

illegitimate to say that there are more than one *testimonium*, e.g. one *testimonium* accrediting the authority of the Word and another one assuring the certainty of salvation. Therefore when the elect is persuaded to be assured of the divinity of the whole Word of God,¹⁶ he is also illumined to know the salvation which is revealed in the Word.¹⁷ And this saving knowledge is assured once when he is effectually called through the ministry of the Word.¹⁸ Certainty of salvation always goes inseparably with that of the Word. It is a very important point that the *WCF* still reserves this theological feature in the structure of the *testimonium*. So the issue is not that the *testimonium* is furnished with or without assurance, but how strong the *testimonium* is.¹⁹

Is the Faith in the *WCF* Furnished with Assurance?

Now comparing *WCF* 14:2 with 18:2, we find that the Westminster divines grounded both faith and assurance upon the certainty of the promises of salvation in the Word. So from the perspective of the structure of the *testimonium* of the *WCF*, faith with certainty of the Word must have some degree of assurance of salvation, though not full assurance! In spite of the fact that the *WCF* treated the doctrine of faith and assurance in separate chapters, their natural theological relationship cannot be separated at all. In this sense assurance of salvation,

WCF 10:1, 3, 4 with 1:5, 6. Based upon these facts, we concluded that for the *WCF* there is only one *testimonium*.

¹⁶ *WCF* 1:5.

¹⁷ *WCF* 1:6; 10:1.

¹⁸ *WCF* 10:1; 3:8. Cf. 18:2.

¹⁹ Notice that in this paragraph the sense of “assurance” is not restricted only to that of “full assurance” in the *WCF*.

Conclusion--The *WCF* vs. Calvin on Assurance

for the *WCF*, is also the *essence* of faith. Because there is only one *testimonium* for the *WCF*, as long as faith comes from the *testimonium*, it inherently comes with assurance in degrees. Kendall's judgment²⁰ seems unconvincing. Hence it does injustice to the true spirit of the *WCF*. So it is untenable.

Then how is the above proposition harmonized with that of *WCF* 18:3: "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith"? Notice that though some passages in the *WCF* have Calvin's concept of assurance, yet all the passages with the explicit wording of assurance in it are of a *full* assurance.²¹ It is a characteristic of the *WCF*'s concept of assurance, distinct from Calvin's. So it is legitimate for the *WCF* to say that assurance is not the essence of faith in

²⁰ Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 195-196. To the chapter on the Westminster Assembly He concludes,

But the apparently unquestioned acceptance of a distinction between faith and assurance; that 'Faith' should have one heading in the Confession and 'Certainty of Salvation' another. This division between faith and assurance seems to have been accepted implicitly from early on in the Assembly. There is no indication at all of any questioning of this significant division. Calvin's view that faith *is* assurance was thus rendered incapable of penetration into the Westminster documents from the start. Beza won the day.

Cf. his "Puritan Modification," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. by W. Stanford Reid, 214.

²¹ There are some passages in the *WCF* displaying Calvin's concept of assurance, namely, 1:6; 3:8; 12:1; 17:2. The term "full assurance" appears in 1:5; 14:3; "infallible assurance" in 18:2, 3. However, the whole of chapter 18 belongs to the *WCF*'s concept of "full assurance." The proof texts are the clues for us to study their implications. For 1:5, they are 1 John 2:20; John 16:13-14; 1 Cor 2:10-12; Isa 54:21. For 1:6, John 6:45; 1 Cor 2:9-12; For 3:8, 2 Pet 1:10. For 12:1, Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6. For 14:3, Heb 6:11-12; 10:22. For 17:2, John 10:28; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 John 2:19. For 18:2, Rom 8:15-16.

its own terminologies. Actually *WCF* 14:3 is a more exact statement:

This faith is different in degrees, ... but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a *full* assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith. [*italics mine*]

Implicitly the Westminster divines made a distinction between full or infallible assurance and assurance in general.

What is full assurance? A Christian with full assurance leads a victorious faith life, diligently makes use of the ordinary means of grace, especially reading the Word of God, then grounds his assurance in the promises of it, bears fruits in good works and sanctification which in turn act as an aid him to strengthen his assurance of election, loving the Lord in sincerity, walking everyday in good conscience, thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ... so far is it from inclining himself to looseness.²² However, it is primarily defined by the exposition of Rom.8:15-16, a witness of the Holy Spirit directly and immediately made to us that we are the children of God.²³ Some Puritans would call it an intuitive assurance.

James Buchanan, in defence of the Marrow men, interprets that full assurance is a “complex assurance, resting on several distinct grounds, and capable of existing in different degrees.”²⁴ The assurance of which the Marrow men spoke of is implied in the *direct* act of faith, he analyzes, as distinct from, but necessarily presupposed in, the

²² See *WCF* 14:3; 16:2; 18:2, 1, 3.

²³ *WCF* 18:2.

²⁴ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 1867 (Banner of Truth: Carlisle, PA, 1984), 184.

full assurance which springs from the *reflex* exercise of faith.²⁵

To explain the implication of “full” assurance we might turn to Thomas Goodwin, a preeminent divine in the Westminster Assembly. He enumerated three points to explicate its reflexivity: (1) that it is an intuitive, secondary act of the first act of faith; (2) that it is a reflexive, sensible act in the mind of the direct, pure act of faith; (3) that they differ in their objects; God or Christ is the object of the first act of faith, while “the object of my seeing I believe is my own believing.”²⁶ Hence Goodwin concluded that this reflexive, sensible, conscious act is not a component of justifying faith. There is a logical priority between them. Furthermore he developed what Letham calls “a somewhat idiosyncratic view of a twofold form of assurance of salvation,”²⁷ which is an *intuitive* assurance in contrast to a *discursive* one, based upon his exposition of Eph. 1:13-14.²⁸ It seems that Goodwin made another distinction between the indirect assurance through the *sylogismus practicus* and the direct assurance (the so-called *sylogismus mysticus*) through the *testimonium* in his restricted sense, which he also called the sealing of the Holy Spirit, a rare experience for choice saints only.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., 185.

²⁶ Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, 8:212. But quoted from Letham, 39.

²⁷ Letham, 37.

²⁸ Goodwin, *Works*, 1:230-233.

²⁹ Cf. Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather*, 96-98. Also Cf. Beeke, 147-149.

Assurance in Seed Form vs. Full Assurance

Then what is assurance in general in the *WCF*? Firstly, faith of any measure always comes inherently with the certainty of the authority of God's Word. Hence it is imbued accordingly with the certainty of salvation in some degrees, though not full.³⁰ Secondly, the assurance in general consists in the fact that the seed of God is once and for all implanted in our heart. The Westminster divines confessed:

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; ... yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, ... by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.³¹

This is the *WCF*'s version of Calvin's treatment of the dichotomy of Spirit and flesh in *Inst.* 3.2.15-21. In the doctrine of perseverance³² the divines pointed out that the children of God "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved,"³³ while they at the same time acknowledged that the children of God "*may*, in this life, be

³⁰ *WCF* 14:2, 3.

³¹ *WCF* 18:4

³² Notice in the *WCF* the doctrine of assurance and that of perseverance are closely related and put together. Compare perseverance in *WCF* 17:2 (trinitarian) with assurance in *WCF* 3:8 (election of God); 14:3 ("through Christ"); 18:3 (work of the Spirit), they are similar in several ways. LC 80 even juxtaposes them in one question to underline their relationship and to contrast their distinction. So the doctrine of perseverance can help to soften tension between the *WCF*'s assurance and Calvin's.

³³ *WCF* 17:1.

Conclusion--The *WCF* vs. Calvin on Assurance

certainly assured that they are in the state of grace”³⁴ The divines continued to find out that the causes of perseverance are the objective saving grace of the trinitarian God, and the subjective experience of “the seed of God within them.” Therefore they concluded that from both “arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.”³⁵ If we further compare *WCF* 17:3, 2 with 18:4, we can infer that what the divines wanted to express is that no matter how Satan, the world and our corruption attack us, and we, who have been graced with the seed of God, though may not attain or forfeit a full assurance in this time, yet we must be generally furnished with a certainty *in seed form*,³⁶ which can persevere us to the end and may grow up into a *full* assurance in due time.

This is the first modification of the *WCF*: making a distinction between saving faith with assurance in seed form and full assurance; hence, ascribing the attainment of *full* assurance of salvation not to the faith in different degrees,³⁷ but only to the Christian who is sealed with the adoption of God through the sweet experience of Rom. 8:15-16;³⁸ and moreover, almost reserving the word “assurance” only for the use in the latter sense.

³⁴ *WCF* 18:1.

³⁵ *WCF* 17:2.

³⁶ Thomas Boston argued, “Now, how faith can grow in any, to a full assurance, if there be no assurance in the nature of it, I cannot comprehend.” The *Marrow* (Boston, 1726), 167. But quoted from Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 1988, p. 10, note.2. What Boston maintained was that there must be an assurance in seed form inherent in faith of any degree.

³⁷ *WCF* 14:3.

³⁸ *WCF* 18:2.

The first modification comes probably from a different exegesis of Rom. 8:15-16 done by the father of Puritans, William Perkins (1558-1602). For Calvin there is only one joint witness in Rom. 8:15-16,³⁹ whereas:

In his exposition of Rom. 8:16, Perkins goes beyond Calvin in making a clear distinction of the relative roles of the testimony of the Holy Spirit and that of “our spirit.” Calvin viewed the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a witness *to* the human spirit. Perkins on the other hand, sees the testimony of the Holy Spirit as being *with* the human spirit.⁴⁰

After this exegesis Perkins redefined faith possibly without the *testimonium* of Rom. 8:16 and assurance certainly with it. Since then the distinction of weak faith without assurance and strong faith with it is generated. The weaker testimony through our spirit is faith whereas the super-strong testimony of the Holy Spirit, alongside our own, is the infallible assurance. So to interpret the experience of the dichotomy of flesh and Spirit, the *WCF* would say that you may lose your sensible assurance⁴¹ while Calvin would say that your faith-assurance may be tinged with doubt. But both claim that faith will get the victory in the long run.⁴²

³⁹ See chapter 6, under The Illumination and Sealing--Calvin on Rom. 8:15-16.

⁴⁰ Gordon J. Keddie, “Unfallible Certenty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting,” *EvQ* 48(Oct-Dec 76): 241.

⁴¹ *WCF* 18:4.

⁴² *WCF* 14:3.

The *Syllogismus Practicus* in the *WCF*

Besides, the *WCF* did not alter the experiential path set by Calvin to seek the assurance of election via the “latter signs.”⁴³ What are the latter signs? According to *WCF* 18:2, there are three elements: certainty of the promises, *syllogismus practicus*,⁴⁴ and the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But for Calvin the first one, the attestation of Scriptures, and the third one, the assurance of salvation, are the double effects of the same single *testimonium*. *Syllogismus practicus* is at most used *a posteriori*. Now the order in *WCF* 18:2 changed that of Calvin. *Syllogismus practicus* is wedged between the double effects of the Calvin’s *testimonium*. This is the second modification of the *WCF* to Calvin’s doctrine of assurance.

But why is the *syllogismus practicus* wedged between them and what is its implication? Out of pastoral concern the *WCF* allows Christians to relieve their inflicted conscience by examining their good works and inward sanctification so that they can step into the testimony of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ So the precedence of *syllogismus practicus* in the *WCF* does not mean its priority over the *testimonium*, but means

⁴³ *WCF* 3:8.

⁴⁴ The “inward evidence of those graces” in *WCF* 18:2 is *syllogismus practicus*, because the proof texts accompanying it, such as 2 Pet 1:4-5, 10-11; 1 John 2:3; 3:14; 2Cor 1:12, display it to be so. So it is the evidence in *WCF* 16:2.

⁴⁵ It might be that Beza placed more accent upon *syllogismus practicus* due to the “pastoral concern with a somewhat more rationalistic theological methodology than Calvin.” See Beeke, 91. He also notices Beza saying, “One should begin with the quest for assurance at the ‘lowest order’...” So Beza put it afore “not because such is primary in itself, but because it is more readily accessible to the conscience of a believer, which in turn will assist him to rise Christward and Godward.” 93. The Puritans used it as a step upon which man can move forward unto the sealing of the Spirit.

inferiority and initiation. Moreover, the *WCF* does not lose the scrutiny of Calvin upon good works by telling us that works are always imperfect and accepted only because we are accepted in His Son.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Therefore my conclusion is: the *WCF* not only does not change the Calvin's structure--the twofold knowledge of God and the double structure of Word and Spirit--in which he derived his doctrine of assurance, but also shares them with him. However, due to two concerns, exegetical and pastoral, the *WCF* adopts two modifications. It is like opening two new small windows to the structure. It indeed brings some readjustments. But it does not change substantially the whole structure and accordingly our outlook from inside. The conclusion of my thesis, from the perspective of Calvin's doctrine of the *testimonium*, converges with Beeke's proposal that "the discrepancy between Calvin and Calvinism [here the *WCF*] on faith and assurance was largely *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *WCF* 16:6.

⁴⁷ Beeke, 26.

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