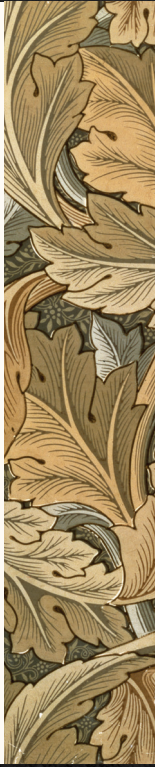




WHY THE 21ST CENTURY
NEEDS A NEW TRANSLATION
OF CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*





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Why the 21st Century Needs a New Translation of Calvin's *Institutes*

Anthony N. S. Lane

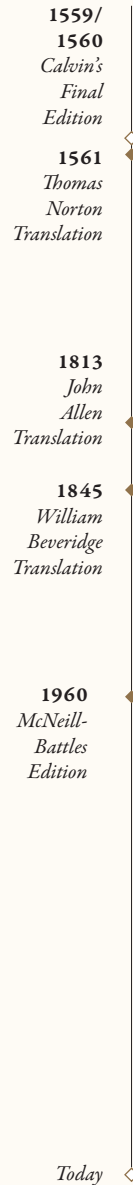
GENERAL EDITOR

Raymond A. Blacketer

TRANSLATOR & EDITOR

Crossway, 2025

Timeline



✦ *What Are the Existing English Translations of Calvin's Institutes?*

There have been four English translations of Calvin's *Institutes*.

- 1 Thomas Norton first translated the *Institutes* in 1561, not long after the publication of Calvin's final editions of 1559/1560.
- 2 John Allen's translation appeared in 1813. He did not view the Norton translation favorably: "it has long been too antiquated, uncouth, and obscure, to convey any just idea of the original work, and abounds with passages which, to the modern English reader, cannot but be altogether unintelligible."
- 3 William Beveridge's translation appeared in 1845. He dismisses Norton's version as "over-scrupulous" and claims that he provided little more than "English words in a Latin idiom." Beveridge fails to mention Allen's rendition in his preface, although he is clearly reliant on the latter. In contrast to both Allen and Beveridge, however, Norton's translation is frequently more accurate than either of the latter. In addition, both Allen and Beveridge employ a turgid and baroque prose that, as often as not, obscures rather than clarifies Calvin's meaning. Finally, like Allen, Beveridge often translates Calvin's 1560 French translation instead of the Latin, without any basis in the Latin text or signal to the reader.
- 4 The 1960 edition by Ford Lewis Battles and J. T. McNeill, in the *Library of Christian Classics* series, has served as a standard since its publication—not only for Anglophone users but for students of Calvin worldwide.

✦ *A New Edition Will Make Calvin Accessible to New Generations of Readers*

Our goal is to produce an edition of this influential classic curated by experts in Reformation History and in both classical and scholastic-theological Latin. An accurate, readable translation—combined with corrected citations, judicious and restrained explanatory notes, and a historically appropriate apparatus—will result in an edition that that will serve lay readers, pastors, students, and scholars well into the twenty-first century. This edition will be notable for the following features:

- The translation itself will be fresh, contemporary, and accurate, based on the Latin text with reference to Calvin's own French translation when it is significant.
- The translation will be readable and accessible to a wide audience, just as Calvin originally envisioned. The intended audience from North America and beyond includes persons with a desire to deepen their knowledge of the Reformed and evangelical faith, students of Calvin and the Reformation, pastors, teachers, and scholars.
- The edition will clearly indicate which biblical passages and which early Christian, medieval, and sixteenth-century authors Calvin himself cites in his edition. It will provide insight into which Scripture passages and theological authors Calvin thought important to consult and mention. It will employ two sets of footnotes to separate Calvin's citations from the editors' explanatory additions.
- It will provide an apparatus that is appropriate to Calvin's historical context and does not impose modern categories onto the text.

- It will offer explanatory notes where necessary, clearly distinguished from Calvin's own citations. Reference to modern *theological interpretations* will be avoided; references to modern historical scholarship will be added to clarify Calvin's thought in its context.
- It will be published with high production values, with careful attention to typesetting, attractive design, binding, and paper that is fitting for one of the great classics of the Christian church.

✦ *Why Does the McNeill-Battles Edition Need to Be Replaced?*

We recognize that no translation has been or will be perfect. But there are numerous passages in the Battles translation that are inaccurate or incomplete.

It does not take long in comparing the original Latin and the Battles English translation to discover that Battles leaves out an entire phrase in the preface to King Francis I ["that is, they should not join in a conspiracy together with the wicked consensus of the people"].

An example of a mistranslation is where Battles translates "*verbi religio*" with the apparently Barthian-inspired "religion of the Word," rather than its proper meaning in the context, "reverence for the Word."

An ongoing list of translation corrections that need to be made to the Battles translation have been compiled online by Professor Jon Balserak: <https://calvinbattlescorrections.blogspot.com>.

Moreover, today's students, lay readers, and generations of readers to come all require an accessible, reader-friendly edition of Calvin's theological treasure. Battles's style can at times be difficult to read, especially for non-specialists. Accessibility is essential if today's readers

are to explore this important primary source for Reformed thought, and thereby to deepen their understanding of the Reformed faith, and for the book to continue to have its intended effect into the twenty-first century.

Richard A. Muller, P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, summarizes the criticism from various scholars of the McNeill-Battles edition as follows:

Both in its apparatus and in its editorial approach to the text, the McNeill-Battles translation suffers from the mentality of the text-critic who hides the original ambience of the text even as he attempts to reveal all of its secrets to the modern reader.

The McNeill-Battles edition obscures Calvin's important original work in at least four ways.

1 The McNeill-Battles Citations Do Not Distinguish Between Calvin's Biblical Citations and Those Added by the Editors

McNeill-Battles makes no distinction between biblical citations that occur in the sixteenth-century editions and those that the editors have supplied themselves. For example, the McNeill-Battles edition includes sixty-seven references to Job. In fact, Calvin only cites Job twenty times in the *Institutes* and mentions Job generally an additional five times. The result is that the reader cannot discern what comes from Calvin and what McNeill-Battles adds to the text. As Muller summarizes, "the majority of the biblical citations found by the modern reader in twentieth-century editions of Calvin's 'guide-book' to the Bible are not found in the original edition or any of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century editions." He observes that this method yields "a highly questionable product." In addition to

adding biblical citations that Calvin omitted, this edition also *omits* biblical citations that Calvin included.

2 The McNeill-Battles Edition Adds Many References to Works that Calvin Does Not Cite

Calvin learned his theology "on the fly," and often picked up his understanding of early Christian, medieval, and contemporary theology from indirect sources. But McNeill-Battles conveys the misleading impression that Calvin was intimately familiar with many theologians. For example, Calvin refers to the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas a mere two times in the *Institutes*. While it might be appropriate to cite Thomas a few times to illustrate medieval theology, the McNeill-Battles edition refers to the works of Thomas Aquinas some 127 times in its footnotes. As a matter of fact, Calvin exhibits no evidence of having direct knowledge of Thomas's writings.

3 The McNeill-Battles Section Headings Conceal Calvin's Theological Method

The McNeill-Battles edition imports section headings that are not in the original. In contrast to the apparatuses that were added to sixteenth-century editions, these headings impose a layer of interpretation onto Calvin's text and conceal its genre as an academic collection of *loci communes* and theological disputations.

As Muller demonstrates, McNeill-Battles apparatus conceals Calvin's method in the *Institutes*, in which he often begins with a discursive statement of the question, which reflects Renaissance methodology, followed by objections and responses to those objections, which reflects the legacy of the medieval classroom.

4 *The McNeill-Battles Footnotes Impose a Modern Theological Interpretation onto Calvin's Theology*

The annotations in the McNeill-Battles footnotes are sometimes misleading and reflect an early twentieth-century Neo-Orthodox interpretation. This rendering distorts Calvin's meaning and fails to present Calvin's thought in its sixteenth-century context. A striking example of this is when McNeill spends several pages of introduction (vol. 1, liii–lv) explaining that Calvin did not focus on the infallibility of the words of Scripture but on its content or message (which McNeill, in typically Barthian fashion, ultimately identifies with Christ, not Scripture). On the contrary, Calvin habitually refers to the Scriptures as having been “dictated” by the Holy Spirit, so that the resulting words are from the Spirit, not the human mind. The McNeill-Battles method imposes a foreign theological grid from the twentieth century onto Calvin's thought.

✦ *Who Would Be Involved with This New Edition of Calvin's Institutes for the 21st Century?*

Anthony N. S. Lane earned his D.D. from the University of Oxford. He currently serves as professor of historical theology at the London School of Theology. He is the author of *A Concise History of Christian Thought* and *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* and compiled *The Lion Christian Classics Collection*. A world-class Calvin scholar, he has written *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, abridged the *Institutes* into a popular student edition, and edited the translation of Calvin's *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. He serves as the general editor for this edition.

Raymond A. Blacketer earned a B.A. from Calvin College, and then an M.Div., Th.M., and Ph.D. from Calvin Theological Seminary. He wrote his dissertation under the direction of renowned Post-Reformation Reformed Theology scholar Richard A. Muller, with the late David C. Steinmetz as his external reader. His areas of expertise include the history of biblical interpretation and the theology of John Calvin and the later Reformed tradition. He teaches adjunctly at Fuller Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary, and is an ordained pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. He serves as the primary translator for this edition.

Crossway is a not-for-profit evangelical publishing house located in Wheaton, Illinois, with an international ministry of publishing book, Bibles, and tracts. It was founded as a gospel literature company in 1938, expanded to include books in 1979, and published the English Standard Version translation of the Bible in 2001, which is now widely used around the world.



*Anthony N. S.
Lane*



*Raymond A.
Blacketer*



✦ *How Do the Major Translations Compare?*

Allen 1.1.6

Though the light which presents itself to all eyes, both in heaven and in earth, is more than sufficient to deprive the ingratitude of men of every excuse, since God, in order to involve all mankind in the same guilt, sets before them all, without exception, an exhibition of his majesty, delineated in the creatures—yet we need another and better assistance, properly to direct us to the Creator of the world.

Beveridge 1.1.6

Therefore, though the effulgence which is presented to every eye, both in the heavens and on the earth, leaves the ingratitude of man without excuse, since God, in order to bring the whole human race under the same condemnation, holds forth to all, without exception, a mirror of his Deity in his works, another and better help must be given to guide us properly to God as a Creator.

Battles 1.1.6

That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude—just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures.

Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe.

Blacketer 1.1.6

Thus that radiance, both in heaven and on earth, that imposes itself upon the eyes of every person, is more than sufficient to take away every excuse from human ingratitude. It is just as God displays his divine majesty, sketched out in his creatures: he shows it to every person without exception in order to implicate the human race in the same guilt.

Nevertheless, another and better source of assistance needs to be added to direct us in the appropriate way to the world's Creator himself.

Therefore he hath not unnecessarily added the light of his word, to make himself known unto salvation, and hath honoured with this privilege those whom he intended to unite in a more close and familiar connection with himself.

Not in vain, therefore, has he added the light of his Word in order that he might make himself known unto salvation, and bestowed the privilege on those whom he was pleased to bring into nearer and more familiar relation to himself.

It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself.

And thus, it is with good reason that he has added the light of his Word. He uses it to make himself known for salvation. And he has granted this privilege to those whom he particularly intended to gather more intimately to himself.

For, seeing the minds of all men to be agitated with unstable dispositions, when he had chosen the Jews as his peculiar flock, he enclosed them as in a fold, that they might not wander after the vanities of other nations.

For, seeing how the minds of men were carried to and fro, and found no certain resting-place, he chose the Jews for a peculiar people, and then hedged them in that they might not, like others, go astray.

For because he saw the minds of all men tossed and agitated, after he chose the Jews as his very own flock, he fenced them about that they might not sink into oblivion as others had.

Because he saw that the minds of all people swirled with uncertain and unstable thoughts, after he chose the Jews as his very own flock, he enclosed them within boundaries to prevent them from disappearing like others did.

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✦ *The Process of Translating John Calvin’s Institutio Christianae Religionis*

RAYMOND A. (RANDY) BLACKETER, PHD

1 *Translating the Latin*

I begin with a line of Latin text from the critical edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*, which we refer to by its short title, the *Opera Selecta*. I take sentences that are lengthy, and there are many, and I divide them into smaller sentences for improved style and readability in English.

Sometimes I will encounter terms that have developed in meaning between the classical period and sixteenth century “Neo-Latin,” as well as later Latin terms that appear in no classical lexica. Thus, I consult a wide range of Latin lexica, covering various eras in the development of the Latin language.

Classical Latin Lexica

- *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, second edition, edited by P. G. W. Glare (2012).
- *A Latin Dictionary* (Lewis and Short) edited by C.T. Lewis and C. Short (1879).
- *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, edited by C.T. Lewis (1890).
- *Dictionnaire Latin Français*, edited by Félix Gaffiot (1934, rev. 2016).
- *Woordenboek Latijn/Nederlands* (LaNe), edited by Harm Pinkster 7th ed. (2018).

Medieval Latin Lexica

- *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (DMLBS), edited by R. E. Latham et al. (2013).
- *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (*Smaller Lexicon of Medieval Latin*), edited by J.F. Niermeyer (1984).

Neo-Latin Lexicon

- *Lexique de la prose latine de la Renaissance / Dictionary of Renaissance Latin from Prose Sources*, edited by René Hoven (2006).

There are times when a word will appear in none of these lexica. However, internet searches usually enable me to track down the meaning of obscure words, as well as technical and legal phrases. In addition, I make use of several very helpful online classics resources, including the Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>) and ΛΟΓΕΙΟΝ (Logeion, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/>). Finally, for technical theological terms, I consult and make reference to Richard A. Muller's *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (2017).

2 Consulting the Predecessors

Once I have translated the line of Latin, I check the four predecessors, namely, the four previous translators of Calvin's *Institutes*. In this stage, I am checking to make sure I have not missed any intricacies or nuances of the Latin grammar or vocabulary, as well as looking for the best ways to communicate the meaning in English. Thomas Norton's version of 1561 is usually quite literal and thus particularly helpful for checking my translation. It is, of course, quite outdated

in its language. John Allen's version (1813), as well as that of Henry Beveridge (1845), often substitute a translation of the French version of Calvin's *Institutes* with no notice to the reader. This practice is no longer acceptable, though consulting the often-clearer French certainly helps to decipher the occasionally obscure Latin at times. I also consult the McNeill-Battles edition, though I intentionally try to avoid as much as possible the duplication of Battles' translation.

3 Citation of Scripture

Calvin often cites scripture from memory. He paraphrases and adapts texts to his argument. Thus, the practice of inserting verses from a translation, employed by Allen and Beveridge, is inaccurate and misleading. Therefore, when I translate Calvin's biblical citations, paraphrases, and allusions, I translate what is present in the Latin. I also compare it to the Latin Vulgate and the English translation based on the Vulgate, the Douay-Rheims version. So far, I have attempted, as much as possible, to avoid the use of quotation marks around biblical citations, since Calvin often does not cite texts verbatim.

With regard to Biblical references, we include any references that occur in the 1559 *Institutes* or earlier. Sometimes passages drop out or are added later. If the *Opera Selecta* notes that a proof text was cited in an earlier version, we include it. We change chapter and verse numbers to correspond with modern versions without notation (this happens most frequently with the Psalms). Sometimes Calvin will bring up a text-critical or translation issue, such as in 2.3.12, which requires further research and annotation:

But the ambiguity of the expression caused them to err, yet even more so it was the poor translation, which has omitted the force

of the Greek article.⁴⁸ For if you render it literally, he does not say that grace was a cooperator with him, but that the grace that was present with him was the originator of it all.⁴⁹

48 Cf. the French: *Toute la faute est venue qu'ils s'arrestent à la translation commune, laquelle est douteuse, mais le text Grec de saint Paul est si clair qu'on n'en peut douter*. "The cause of the whole error was that they stuck with the common translation, which is dubious, but St. Paul's Greek text is so clear that it cannot be doubted."

49 The Vulgate renders the verse: *non ego autem sed gratia Dei mecum*, "not I but the grace of God with me." Valla and Erasmus corrected it to *non ego autem, sed gratia Dei quae est mecum*, "not I but the grace of God which is with me." The Vulgate translation lent credibility to the synergistic understanding of cooperating grace. See Calvin's translation of and commentary on I Cor. 15:10, CO 49: 536, 541. The Greek text in NA²⁷ reads: οὐκ ἐγὼ δὲ ἀλλὰ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ [ἡ] σὺν ἐμοί. NA²⁷ puts the article that Calvin refers to in brackets, because the manuscript evidence is inconclusive. Calvin's argument echoes that of Erasmus who, following Lorenzo Valla, made the same argument in early versions of his *Annotationes* on this verse. Beginning in 1527, however, Erasmus added a defense of the common scholastic interpretation that Calvin rejects, likely in response to Luther's teaching on grace. In *Novum Testamentum Annotationes* (Basel: Froben, 1527), 455. See Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 57, 108, 178–179; CWE 15: 177–178 n. 15.

Here it was necessary to determine Calvin's precise argument regarding the Greek text. The Greek article he mentions occurs in the Greek text that was available to him, but this is complicated by the fact that, today, New Testament scholars find roughly equal manuscript evidence for either keeping it or deleting it; thus the standard edition of the Greek New Testament puts the article in brackets. I consulted Bruce M. Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* for this information. In addition, there is a theological debate involved here, and a development in Erasmus' treatment of the issue, almost certainly in reaction to Luther's emphasis on salvation as God's work alone. I found references to this in the modern edition of Erasmus' works, which also pointed me to further scholarly studies of the matter.

4 Comparing the French

In addition, I consult J. Benoit's critical edition of Calvin's 1560 French *Institution*. The French translation, executed by Calvin himself, is helpful for clarifying Calvin's Latin, which can be obscure due to its compactness and brevity. In addition, there are interesting and significant differences in the French translation, which illuminate how Calvin viewed the different audiences for the Latin and French versions. When I began the project, I only included differences that were noted in the *Opera Selecta*. However, many notable differences are not cited there. Benoit notes all significant differences from the Latin. I make a judgement call regarding their significance, later to be reviewed by General Editor Tony Lane, and I add the French a translation thereof in a footnote. For translating Calvin's sixteenth-century Middle French, I consult *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (<http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/>) and Randle Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611). Book 1 of the *Institutes* still requires a thorough review of the Latin differences in our edition.

5 Citation of the Fathers and Medievals

Calvin frequently cites patristic and medieval authors. I translate his Latin citations directly, rather than inserting a modern translation, because, like his citations of Scripture, Calvin sometimes paraphrases the citation. I check the references in the *Opera Selecta* against the actual passages in J-P Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. On occasion, these references are incorrect. Calvin's editions of the fathers will sometimes differ from modern numbering, especially in collections of letters; these numbers are changed without notation, with more specific

chapters and sections indicated in square brackets, since Calvin does not usually supply those.

While I retranslate Calvin's patristic citations, I do refer readers to two widely available English translations of the fathers in order for them to be able to read these citations in their context. I cite the standard, but quite old, collection by Philip Schaff, and the newer (but sometimes still dated) series *The Fathers of the Church*. Similarly, Calvin often cites or refers to classical works. I translate these, and also refer readers to the *Loeb Classical Library* editions when available.

The question remains whether to also cite more modern critical editions of the fathers, as well as the most modern translations. I consider that decision to lie with general editor Tony Lane.

6 Annotations for Context

Readers, and particularly lay readers and students, require historical context for understanding Calvin's arguments. I write these notes as I proceed through the translation. Here the McNeill-Battles translation notes could be misleading. Rather than providing a particular theological spin on Calvin, the notes should be historical in nature.

In addition, certain phrases and images that Calvin uses require explanation. Note the following example from the preface to King Francis I:

In fact, already in his day, Hilary considered it a grievous error that people were engrossed in foolish admiration of episcopal grandeur and failed to perceive the deadly Lerna⁴⁵ concealed under that mask.

Battles translates this as “deadly Hydra,” perhaps following Beveridge, as he often does. Allen renders it “dreadful mischiefs.” Norton has a “deadly pestilence,” perhaps reflecting the French version. Though the general gist is correct, none of these is precisely what Calvin says, and they obscure Calvin's intentional use of classical references to display his renaissance eloquence. The note explains:

⁴⁵ Erasmus lists among his adages “a Lerna of troubles” (Λέρνη κακῶν), which, he notes, means “an accumulation of many ills all piled up on one another.” Citing classical sources, Erasmus observes that Lerna was a lake or region into which people cast all sorts of refuse, with the result that noxious vapors arose from it. It was also the home of the Hydra, the monster with regenerating heads that Heracles (Hercules) defeated with Greek fire, though Calvin uses the image here and elsewhere (cf. 3.4.18, below) to refer to a toxic pile of troubles. Erasmus, *Adagia*, 1.3.27, CWE 31: 258.

7 Two Sets of Notes

To carefully distinguish between Calvin's citations and editorial annotations, we are using two sets of notes. Letters indicate Calvin's actual marginal citations, with modern sources in brackets; numbers indicate editorial annotations.

8 Proofing and Correction

Once I finish translating a section, I send it to the Latin proofer, who checks my translation for accuracy. I then incorporate the Latin proofer's comments and suggestions into the translation. Often this involves a discussion about the right vocabulary to use to best convey Calvin's ideas. I strive to find language that is simultaneously accurate and contemporary, particularly since today's students have less experience with antiquated forms of the English language.



CALVIN

*from the original portrait in the
Public Library at Geneva*

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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John Calvin to the Reader

In the first edition of this work of ours, I had, for the most part, carried out a less extensive treatment of the subject, as is usual in short treatises.¹ For I did not at all expect the success that the Lord has given it out of his unbounded goodness.² But when I realized that nearly all the devout received it so favorably, which I had never dared wish for,³ let alone hope for, I sincerely felt that they credited me much more than I deserved. So, I thought it would be terribly ungrateful if I did not at least attempt, to the extent of my limited ability, to respond to such favorable expressions of enthusiasm for me, which spontaneously encouraged my diligence. And not only did I attempt this in the second edition, but in fact I have enriched it with some further expansion every time the work has been reprinted since. However, although I did not regret the effort that I devoted to it at the time, still, I was never satisfied until it was arranged in the order in which it is now presented. Now I am confident that I have produced something that can meet with the approval of you all.

I can certainly provide some compelling evidence about how much effort I have expended to carry out this work for the church of God. For, last winter, when I thought quartan fever⁴ was issuing a summons for my death, the more

¹ On this *Letter to the Reader*, revised in 1559, see Muller, "Of Prefaces, 'Arguments,' and Letters to the Reader: Calvin's Testimonies to his Intention and Method," *TUC*, 21–38.

² Cf. the French: *m'estudiant à brieveté*; "striving for brevity."

³ Or "pray for," *voto expetere*. Cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.8, *LCL* 249:16–17.

⁴ Quartan fever is a form of malaria (*plasmodium malariae*) characterized by outbreaks of fever every fourth day. Theodore Beza records that Calvin suffered with this for eight months, beginning in October 1558. See Beza, *Ioannis Calvini Vita*, *CO* 21:56; *Tracts*, 1:xxvi.

the disease oppressed me, the less I spared myself, until I could leave behind a book after I was gone, which would somewhat return the favor for such kind encouragement from the devout. For my part, I would have preferred to finish it sooner, but “it is done soon enough, if it is done well enough.”⁵ However, I will conclude that it has appeared at an opportune time when I perceive that it is somewhat more fruitful for the church of God than it has been before. This is my only wish.

And clearly it would go badly with me unless, content with the approval of God alone, I disregarded both the foolish and perverse judgments of ignorant persons and the unjust and malicious judgments of the wicked. For God has entirely devoted my mind to the pursuit of expanding his kingdom and assisting the public benefit. And I am thoroughly aware, and I have God and the angels as witnesses, that I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by securing the pure teaching of piety since the time I assumed the office of doctor in the church. Despite this, I still suppose that there is no one who is more attacked, mauled, and torn to pieces by slanders than I.⁶ When this letter was already at press, I received news that at Augsburg, where the Diet of the Empire was being held,⁷ the rumor had been circulated that I had defected to the papacy. This rumor was received in the courts of the princes with more rapacious delight than was decent.⁸ Such, apparently, is the gratitude of those who are certainly not unaware of the rather numerous examples of my resolve. These examples contradict this extremely vile slander such that they ought to have protected me from this slander before all fair and humane

⁵ “*verum sat cito si sat bene*.” A classical reference. Jerome relates that Cato the Elder was the source of this maxim; see *Ep.* 69.9, *MPL* 22:644; cf. Erasmus, *Adagia*, 2.1.1, *CWE* 33:17.

⁶ The 1560 French edition adds: *tant des ennemis manifestes de la vérité de Dieu, que de beaucoup de canailles qui se sont fourrez en son Eglise: tant des Moines qui ont apporté leurs frocs hors de leurs cloîtres pour infecter le lieu où ils venoyent, que d'autres vilains qui ne valent pas mieux qu'eux*; “by both open enemies of the truth of God, and by many scoundrels who have intruded into his church; by both monks who have brought their habits out of their cloisters to infect every place they go, and by other villains who are no better than they are.”

⁷ The Diet of Augsburg that was held March 3–August 19, 1559. This Diet failed to achieve any progress in uniting the various protestant factions. John Frederick of Saxony's intransigence was typical; he insisted that all non-Lutheran views of the sacraments (namely those of the Reformed) be condemned. See Hough, *Peace of Augsburg*, 150–154.

⁸ The 1560 French edition adds: *ce qui monstroient que beaucoup de meschans hypocrites faisaient profession de l'Evangile, eussent bien voulu qu'ainsi fust*; “revealing that many wicked hypocrites who professed the gospel would have been happy if it were true.”

judges.⁹ But the Devil, along with all his minions, is mistaken if he thinks that by overwhelming me with disgusting falsehoods he will render me more fragile or acquiescent by this undignified treatment. For I trust that God, according to his immeasurable goodness, will enable me to persevere in the course of his holy calling with unwavering endurance. In this edition, I provide devout readers with fresh evidence of that fact.

Furthermore, my plan in this work has been to prepare and instruct students of sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word in such a way that they may have easy access to it and so that they can make their way through it with unhindered stride. For I think I have so encapsulated the sum of religion in all its parts, and also arranged it in such an order that, for those who have properly comprehended it, it will not be difficult to determine what they ought to principally look for in Scripture, and to what scope¹⁰ they should refer everything that Scripture contains. Accordingly, now that the way has been paved, as it were, I will always condense any future expositions of Scripture that I might publish¹¹ into a compact form. For I will need neither to engage in lengthy dogmatic disputations nor to digress into commonplaces.¹² By this method, I will spare devout readers considerable frustration and tedium, as long as they come to Scripture armed in advance

⁹ Cf. the French: *Voilà le bon loyer que me rendent beaucoup de courtisans lesquels ont souvent expérimenté ma constance, & pourtant me devoient bien servir d'avocats, si l'ingratitude ne les eust empêchez: & tant plus devoient iuger équitablement de moy, m'ayant cogneu tel*; “Look what a fine reward many of the courtiers give me, who have often experienced my resolve, and thus ought to have served well as my defenders, if ingratitude had not hindered them! And they ought to judge me fairly all the more, having known me to be such.”

¹⁰ *scopus*, the “scope” in the sense of the aim, goal, objective, or the end in view (French *but*); cf. Muller, *TUC*, 69–70. Beveridge translates this as “head,” which also captures Calvin's meaning. For Calvin, Scripture passages contain doctrine that can be referred to a *locus* or heading of doctrine.

¹¹ This sentence remains unchanged from the Letter to the Reader of 1539, before Calvin published his first biblical commentary, on Romans, in 1540.

¹² Dogmatic disputations (*disputationes de dogmatibus*) and commonplaces (*loci communes*) were important aspects of theological education and discursive method in the sixteenth century. Calvin, beginning with the 1539 *Institutes* and his commentary on Romans, determined that he would exclude extended polemical and doctrinal discussions from his biblical commentaries, and would instead include them in successive editions of the *Institutes*. While other expositors of the day, such as Martin Bucer, produced rather prolix commentaries with lengthy digressions into theological topics, Calvin preferred a concise method in his commentaries. His *Institutes*, consequently, became the repository for his theological commonplaces. See Calvin's discussion of his method in the letter dedicating his Romans commentary to Simon Grynaeus, *CO* 10.2:402–406; *COR* 2.13:3–6; and cf. Muller, *TUC*, 101–117.

with a knowledge of the present work, like a required tool. But because the reason for this design clearly appears in so many of my commentaries, as in a mirror,¹³ I prefer to let the matter itself indicate the method rather than to declare it in words.

Farewell, dear reader; and if you receive any benefit from my labors, support me by your prayers before God our Father.

Geneva, August 1, 1559.

*I profess that I am numbered among those who write
as they make progress, and who make progress as they write.*

AUGUSTINE^a

The zeal of those whose cause I undertook,
Has swelled a short defense into a book.¹⁴

^a Augustine, *Ep.* 143[.2, *MPL* 33:585; *NPNF1* 1:490; *FC* 20:150].

¹³ The editions of 1539–1554 here read: “But because my commentary on the Epistle to the Romans will serve as an example of this design. . . .”

¹⁴ Omitted by Allen, as well as by Norton; this translation of the couplet is by Henry Beveridge, which resists any improvement.

The Theme of the Present Work

From the French Editions of 1541–1557¹

So that readers can better profit from this present book, I would like to briefly show them the usefulness they will obtain by reading it. For, by doing this, I will show them the objective² they should pursue and to which they should direct their attention while reading it. Although the Holy Scripture contains perfect doctrine, to which one cannot add anything, since our Lord intended to display the infinite treasures of his wisdom in Scripture—nevertheless, a person who is not thoroughly experienced with Scripture will have a significant need for some guidance and direction in order to know what to look for in it, so that one will not wander here and there, but follow a definite path in order to always reach the destination to which the Holy Spirit calls one.

For this reason, it is the duty of those who have received more plentiful light from God than others to help the simple in this regard, and extend their hand to them, as it were, to guide and assist them in finding the sum of what God wills to teach us in his Word. But there is no better way to do this in writing than by treating the principal and important subjects that are included

¹ The 1560 French edition replaced this with a translation of the letter to the reader. See Muller, *TUC*, 31.

² See. n. 10 above on the term *scopus*.

in the Christian philosophy.³ For whoever possesses this understanding will be prepared to make more progress in the school of God in one day than someone else might make in three months, because they know pretty much where to refer each sentence. They will also have a standard by which to measure whatever they encounter. Seeing, then, that it was very necessary to provide assistance in this way to those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation, I have tried hard to accomplish this, according to the ability God has given me. And for that purpose, I have composed this very book. And I wrote it first in Latin, for the benefit of all learned persons, regardless of their nationality; then later, desiring to share with our French nation whatever fruit it might impart, I also translated it into our language. I dare not give it an excessive testimonial and claim how profitable it will be to read it, for fear I would appear to appraise my own work too highly. I can, however, promise that it will have the capacity to function as a key and a point of entry to provide access to a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture for all children of God. Therefore, if, in the future, our Lord gives me the means and the opportunity to write some commentaries,⁴ I will employ as much brevity as I can, since there will be no need to go into lengthy digressions, given that I have here elaborated at length on virtually all the articles pertaining to Christianity. And since we must recognize that all truth and sound doctrine come from God, I will dare to boldly declare, in frankness, what I think of this work, acknowledging it to be more from God than my own, since, truthfully, all praise for it must be given to him. Thus, I encourage all who revere the Word of the Lord to read it and to diligently impress it in their memory, if they desire, first, to have a summary of Christian doctrine, and then an entryway to enable them to profit well from the reading of both the Old and New Testaments. When they have done so, they

will know from experience that I have not intended to deceive them with my words. If any are unable to understand all it contains, they should nonetheless not be discouraged, but always continue to proceed further, in the hope that one passage will provide a more easily discernible interpretation of the other. Above all, they must be advised to have recourse to the Scripture to examine the passages that I cite as proof texts.

³ Erasmus developed the concept of the *philosophia Christi*, which originated in patristic writings. See Heidtmann, "Philosophia Christi"; Bradshaw, "Christian Humanism." On Calvin's use of the term, see Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin*, 241–253. The phrase appears in Nicholas Cop's inaugural address, CO 10.2:31, Eng. trans. in the Battles ed. of the 1536 *Institutes*, 364. Calvin may have been the coauthor of this address, as Theodore Beza asserts; see de Greef, *WJC*, 67–68; Gordon, *Calvin*, 37–38, 346 nn. 22–24; Knecht, *Renaissance Warrior*, 311–312.

⁴ Calvin had already published the commentary on Romans in 1540; his first French commentary, on Jude, would appear in 1542. Cf. n. 11, above.

Prefatory Address to King Francis I

To the most powerful and noble monarch, Francis, Most Christian King of the French, his sovereign, John Calvin wishes peace and salvation in Christ.¹

When I first set my hand to this work, most illustrious King, nothing was further from my mind than writing anything that I would later present to your Majesty. My intention was only to teach some elementary lessons to train in true piety those who are touched by any zeal for religion.² I exerted myself in this work primarily for the sake of our French compatriots. For I observed that very many of them were hungering and thirsting for Christ, but I saw very few who had been given even a small amount of initial instruction in the correct knowledge of him. The book itself, since it is composed as a simple, even elementary form of teaching, speaks to my intended method.

But when I perceived that the fury of certain wicked persons in your kingdom had grown so powerful that there is no room for sound doctrine within it, I thought it would be well worth my effort if, with the same work, I both provided my instruction³ for them and published my confession for you. From this work you could become familiar with the nature of the doctrine against which these madmen burn with so much rage—those who today throw your realm into chaos by fire and the sword.⁴ Nor will I be afraid to acknowledge that

¹ Francis I (1491–1547) was King of France 1515–1547. On this dedicatory letter to Francis I, see Muller, *TUC*, 24–26; Pannier, ed., *Épître au roi François Ier*; Marmelstein, *Étude comparative*, 25–30.

² Cf. the French: *d'aucune bonne affection de Dieu*; “by any proper affection for God.”

³ *institutio*, “instruction.” Allen and Beveridge translated the title of Calvin’s book with the plural “Institutes,” reflecting this meaning from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a digest of the elements of a subject,” which, it notes, is “usually in [the] plural.”

⁴ The “Affair of the Placards,” on October 17–18, 1534, in which protestant zealots posted broadsheets denouncing the Mass in Paris, Orléans, and other French cities, ignited an inferno of persecution in

I have included here nearly the entire sum of that very doctrine, which, they shout, must be punished with imprisonment, banishment, proscription, and flames, and must be exterminated on land and at sea. I know full well the wild accusations with which they have filled your ears and mind in an attempt to make our cause utterly hateful to you. But, in accordance with your clemency, you should consider this: there will be no innocence left at all, either in words or in actions, if it is enough to merely level an accusation.

Certainly, in order to cast aspersions on it, someone could allege that this doctrine, of which I am attempting to render you an account, has for a long time been condemned by the verdict of persons of all social ranks and that it has already for a long time been undermined in court by many previous rulings. In that case, such a person would only be saying that this doctrine has partly been violently expelled through the conspiracy and power of its adversaries, and in part insidiously and fraudulently oppressed by falsehoods, cunning schemes, and slanders. It is an act of violence that bloodthirsty sentences are passed against it without a hearing. It is a fraud that it is unjustly charged with sedition and crime.⁵ So that no one may suppose that we are complaining about this situation for no reason, you yourself, most noble King, can be our witness to how this doctrine is daily discredited in your presence by deceptive slanders. These slanders, namely, are that the only intention of this doctrine is to wrest the scepters from the hands of kings, to overturn all tribunals and courts, to subvert all social ranks and forms of government, to disturb the peace and tranquility of the people, to abrogate all laws, to disperse

France and turned Francis I, who had previously protected a few well-connected moderate reformers and humanists, decisively against Protestantism. By the end of November, dozens of protestants had been imprisoned, and six had been burned for heresy, with many more to follow. On January 13, 1535, copies of a provocative treatise against the mass by Antoine Marcourt, the author of the placards, showed up in Paris, leading to a ban on the printing of new books. On January 29, the King led a religious procession to purify the city from the pollution of heresy and gave a fiery speech denouncing the Protestants. Persecution continued until the Edict of Coucy, July 16, 1535, which, however, offered amnesty to "Sacramentarians" only if they disavowed their views on the papal mass. The effect of the placards was to make things more dangerous for "Lutherans" in France, harming their reputation and making them look like a threat to society, and to strengthen the position of the enemies of reform. See OER 3:279; McNeil, *Guillaume Budé*, 124; Knecht, *Renaissance Warrior*, 313–323.

⁵ Francis I had written to the German princes on February 1, 1535, to defend his severe actions against the Protestants, whom he characterized as plotting sedition. See Herminjard, 3:249–254, and particularly 252.

all properties and possessions, and, in a word, to turn everything upside down. And yet you hear only the smallest fraction of the slander. For horrible reports are circulated among the populace. If they were true, the whole world would justly pronounce this doctrine and its authors worthy of a thousand fires and crosses.⁶ Now that public hostility has been ignited against it, who would be surprised when people give credence to these grossly unjust accusations? This is why persons of all social ranks concur and conspire to condemn us and our doctrine. Caught up by this feeling, those who sit in judgment pronounce as verdicts the prejudices they brought with them from home. They think they have duly discharged their duty if they order to be brought to punishment⁷ only those who are convicted by their own confession or by reliable testimonies. But convicted of what crime? The crime of holding this condemned doctrine, they say. But by what law has this doctrine been condemned? Nevertheless, this was the mainstay of our defense: not to deny this doctrine, but to defend it as true. Now, even the opportunity to whisper a reply is cut off.

For this reason, I not unjustly request, Most Invincible King, that you undertake a full investigation of this case. Until the present day, it has been conducted without any legal order and with more uncontrolled rage than lawful seriousness—or rather, it has been pursued in a haphazard way. Nor should you suppose that I have my own personal defense in mind here, by which I might secure for myself a safe return to my native country.⁸ For, while I continue to hold for it the human affection that is fitting, nevertheless, I do not miss it bitterly, given the current circumstances. But I plead the common cause of all the devout, and consequently the very cause of Christ. This cause now lies utterly torn and trampled in your kingdom and, as it were, in a deplorable state, although this situation has arisen from the tyranny of certain Pharisees rather than with your complicity. But how this situation has come about is not important to discuss here. The cause clearly lies afflicted. For the ungodly have

⁶ French: *gibbets*, which has the same meaning as the English term. The Latin is *crux*, which can also mean a gallows or gibbet.

⁷ *supplicium*, a term often used for capital punishment; cf. the French: *jugent personne à mort*; "sentence anyone to death."

⁸ Because of his association with the newly-elected rector of the University of Paris, Nicolas Cop, who was suspected of Lutheran sympathies, Calvin was forced to flee Paris, and eventually France, and in 1534 he settled in Basel.

been successful to the extent that the truth of Christ, if it does not perish—seeing that it is driven out and scattered abroad—at any rate lies hidden, as if it were buried and in dishonor. Moreover, the poor church is either consumed by cruel slaughter, driven away into banishment, or so traumatized by threats and terror that persons dare not open their mouths. And still the ungodly persist in their usual madness and ferocity, which is routine for them, violently battering a wall already crumbling and a ruin of their own making. In the meantime, no one comes forward to provide their protection against such madness. But any of those who wish to be considered the greatest advocates for the truth decide that the error and ignorance of unlearned persons should be pardoned. For this is how these “moderates” speak: they label as error and ignorance what they know to be the most certain truth of God and call unlearned those whose intelligence, they realize, was not so contemptible to Christ that he considered them to be unworthy of the mysteries of his heavenly wisdom. This is how ashamed of the gospel they all are.

But it will be up to you, most serene King, to turn away neither your ears nor your mind from so just a defense, especially when it concerns a matter of such importance, namely, the question of how the integrity of God’s glory can be maintained on the earth, how God’s truth can retain its dignity, and how the kingdom of Christ can continue among us in good repair. This is a cause worthy of your hearing, worthy of your investigation, worthy of your judgment. Indeed, this deliberation also makes a true king: to acknowledge that he is a minister of God in the administration of his kingdom. Moreover, the one who does not rule in order to serve the glory of God does not exercise the office of king but commits robbery.⁹ Furthermore, a person is mistaken who expects lasting prosperity for one’s kingdom when the scepter of God, that is, his holy Word, does not rule it. Because that heavenly oracle cannot fail that declares where prophecy ceases the people will be scattered (Prov. 29:18).

Nor should disdain for our insignificance sway you from this endeavor. In fact, we are fully aware of what poor and lowly little people we are, namely, before God, we are miserable sinners, and in the eyes of the public, we are

⁹ Cf. Augustine’s statement: “When justice is set aside, then, what are kingdoms but great gangs of thieves?” *Civ. Dei*, 4.4, *MPL* 41:115; *NPNF1* 2:66; *FC* 8:195.

most contemptible. We are—if you will—truly the excrement and garbage of the world, or even something more contemptible, if one can name such a thing. As a result, there is nothing left for us to boast about before God, except his mercy alone (2 Cor. 10[:17–18]), by which, without any merit of our own (Titus 3[:5–7]), we have been admitted to the hope of eternal salvation. And we have not that much to boast about before others, apart from our weakness (2 Cor. 11[:30], 12[:5, 9]), but they consider even the slightest admission of that the greatest disgrace.

But our doctrine must stand exalted above all the glory of the world and invincible above all power. For the doctrine is not ours, but comes from the living God, and his Christ, whom the Father has appointed as King, that he may have dominion from sea to sea, and from the rivers to the very ends of the earth (Ps. 72[:8]). Another purpose is that he may, in fact, rule in such a manner that the whole earth, with the strength of its iron and bronze and the splendor of its gold and silver, will be smashed to pieces like earthenware vessels once he has struck it with nothing but the rod of his mouth. This is in harmony with what the prophets proclaimed regarding the magnificence of his kingdom (Dan. 2:32[–35]; Isa. 11:4; Ps. 2:9).

However, our adversaries shout in protest that we falsely use the Word of God as a pretext, and that we are the most wicked corrupters of that Word. In fact, by reading our confession, you yourself will be able to judge, according to your wisdom, not only how malicious is this slander, but also how blatant is this shamelessness.

Yet something further must be said here to elicit your awareness and attention, or at least to pave the way for you to read that confession. When he directed that every prophecy should conform to the analogy of faith¹⁰ (Rom. 12:6), Paul specified an utterly reliable measure¹¹ by which one ought to test the interpretation of Scripture. And, consequently, if our doctrine is examined according to this analogy of faith, then victory is in our hands. For what

¹⁰ *fidei analogia*. The analogy of faith, or rule of faith, refers to the criterion that is used to judge doctrines by their consistency with the orthodox Christian faith, as defined by the main themes of Scripture and in the early Christian creeds.

¹¹ Latin *amussis*, literally, the ruler or straight edge that a carpenter or mason would use. Cf. *Comm. Sen. Clem.* 132–133 and n. 18; Erasmus, *Adages* 1.5.90, *CWE* 31:462–463.

corresponds better and more closely to faith than to acknowledge that we are stripped bare of all virtue, to be clothed by God? That we are empty of all good, to be filled by him? That we are slaves to sin, to be liberated by him? That we are blind, to be enlighten by him? That we are lame, to be restored by him? That we are weak, to be supported by him? That every ground of boasting is stripped away from us, for him alone to stand out as glorious and for us to boast in him?¹² When we bring up these and other similar points, they interrupt and complain that in this way we subvert some sort of blind light of nature, fabricated preparations, free choice, and works that are meritorious for eternal salvation, along with their works of supererogation as well.¹³ For it is intolerable to them that the praise and glory of all goodness, virtue, righteousness, and wisdom should remain entirely with God.

But we do not read of people who have been blamed for having drawn too deeply from the fountain of living water; on the contrary, there is a severe rebuke for those who have dug for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jer. 2:13). In addition, what is more consistent with faith than to reassure oneself that God is a propitious Father when Christ is acknowledged as a brother and propitiator? Or to confidently expect all joy and prosperity from him whose unspeakable love toward us went so far that he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us (Rom. 8:32)? Or to rest in the certain expectation of salvation and eternal life, when one reflects on the fact that the Father gave us Christ, and that these treasures are hidden in him? Here they pounce on us and cry out that such certainty of confidence is not free from arrogance and presumption. But just as we should presume nothing of ourselves, so we should presume everything of God. Nor are we

12 Calvin's wordplay, enabled by the Latin terms *glorior* (to boast, to glory) and *gloriosus* (glorious) is captured by older English translations that use the now archaic term "to glory." Thus Allen: "...to divest ourselves of all ground of glorying, that he alone may be eminently glorious, and that we may glory in him?" Cf. 1 Cor. 1:31, 2 Cor. 10:17, Vulg.

13 Like Luther before him, Calvin is here arguing against the common late medieval view of salvation, controversially referred to as "semi-Pelagian," that made human initiative in salvation primary and placed considerable emphasis on human efforts. Works of supererogation refer to the Roman Catholic doctrine that some good works, such as the evangelical counsels of perfection (vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience to superiors), go beyond God's basic requirements and earn additional merit that the church can dispense from its treasure of merit to others, for example, through indulgences. See Muller, sv. *opera supererogationis*. Calvin discusses the topic in greater depth below, 3.14.12–21.

stripped of empty boasting for any other reason than to learn to boast in the Lord (2 Cor. 10[:17]; Jer. 9[:23–24]).

What more is there to say? Most valiant King, look over every component of our case, and consider us more wicked than any kind of criminals, unless you clearly find that this is why we labor and suffer abuse, because we put our hope in the living God (1 Tim. 4:10). For we believe that this is eternal life, to know the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent (John 17:3). Because of this hope, some of us are bound in chains; others are beaten with rods; some are led around to be mocked; others are declared outlaws; some are most savagely tortured; others escape by flight. We are all oppressed by troubles, cursed with dreadful imprecations, attacked with abusive slanders, and treated in ways most unjustified.¹⁴

Now, look at our adversaries (I speak of the class of sacrificing priests,¹⁵ at whose whim and direction others carry out hostilities against us) and consider with me, for a moment, the intensity that drives them. They readily permit both themselves and others to ignore, neglect, and despise true religion, which is handed down in the Scriptures, and which should have been indisputable to all. They think it unimportant what opinion anyone holds, or does not hold, about God and Christ, as long as one submits one's mind to the church's judgment with "implicit faith," as they call it.¹⁶ Nor does it bother them very much if it turns out that the glory of God is violated by blatant blasphemies, as long as no one raises a finger against the primacy of the Apostolic See¹⁷ and the authority of Holy Mother Church. Why, then, do they wage war so fiercely and bitterly for the mass, purgatory, pilgrimages, and this sort of nonsense, that they deny that any piety will be sound without a very explicit faith, so to speak, in these things, even though they cannot prove any of these come from the Word of God? Why, if not because their belly is their god, their kitchen their religion? If these are taken away, they believe they will no longer be Christians, or even

14 See above, n. 4.

15 *ordo sacrificorum*, priests who offer the sacrifice of the Mass.

16 See Muller, *DLGTT*, s.v. *fides implicita*: "a faith that is mere assent without certain knowledge, e.g., faith that accepts as true 'what the church believes,' without knowing the objective contents of the faith." Calvin rejects this notion in 3.2.2–5.

17 The Apostolic See refers to Rome, the seat of authority of the Pope, considered the successor to the Apostle Peter.

human beings! For while some gorge themselves sumptuously and others subsist on meager little crusts, they still all live from the same pot, which, without this kindling,¹⁸ would not only grow cold, but completely freeze. Whoever among them cares the most for one's belly, then, turns out to be the most ardent warrior for one's faith. In short, they all, without exception, devote themselves to this purpose, either to keep their kingdom safe, or their bellies stuffed. But none of them reveals even the least indication of sincere zeal.

And despite this, they do not cease to attack our doctrine and to impugn and defame it, with whatever epithets they can come up with, to render it either hated or suspect. They call it novel and of recent origin; they mock it as doubtful and uncertain. They ask what miracles have confirmed it. They ask whether it is right to maintain it contrary to the consensus of so many holy fathers and the most ancient custom. They pressure us to admit that our doctrine is schismatic, since it makes war against the church, or to admit that the church was extinct for many ages, during which time one heard nothing of the sort. Lastly, they say that it is unnecessary to provide many arguments, since one can judge our doctrine's character by its fruits, given that it has produced such a multitude of sects, so many seditious disturbances, and such free rein for vices.¹⁹ Of course, it is very easy for them to deride what they consider a lost cause before the unlearned and uninformed masses. But if we could also have our turn to speak, this acrimony with which they so froth at us from their arrogant mouths, and with as much license as impunity, would certainly subside.

In the first place, for them to call it novel is a violent attack on God, whose holy Word does not deserve the accusation of novelty. Certainly, I have no doubt at all that it is new to them—to those for whom both Christ and the gospel are new! But those who have known that this preaching of Paul is ancient, that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification (Rom. 4:25), will detect nothing new among us. The fact that this doctrine has long lain unknown and buried is the fault of human godlessness. Now that, by God's

¹⁸ That is, the practices of the mass, purgatory, and pilgrimages that Calvin argues are unbiblical, yet which the church establishment had made mandatory.

¹⁹ Calvin lists charges that numerous Roman Catholics levied against the Reformers and the Reformation. Many of these charges can be found, e.g. in Johann Eck, *Enchiridion*, and the trans. by Battles. For detailed examples, see OS 3:14–15 and notes.

goodness, it is restored to us, this doctrine, at least by the right of postliminy,²⁰ ought to recover its status as ancient.

That they consider our doctrine to be doubtful and uncertain arises from the same source: ignorance. This is undoubtedly what the Lord complains about through his prophet: the ox knows its owner, and the donkey knows its masters' manger, but his people do not know him (Isa. 1:3). But no matter how much they deride its uncertainty, if they had to seal their own doctrine at the expense of their own blood and life, then we would see how much it really means to them. Our confidence is far different: it dreads neither the terrors of death nor even the very judgment of God.

It is unreasonable for them to demand miracles from us. For we are not forging some new gospel, but we hold to the very same gospel. All the miracles that Christ and the apostles ever performed serve to authenticate its truth. But they have one distinct advantage over us: they can confirm their faith by continuous miracles that have occurred right down to the present day. Or rather, they *allege* miracles that are capable of agitating an otherwise settled mind,²¹ since they are so pointless and ridiculous, or else empty and deceitful. And yet, even if they were utterly supernatural, such miracles would carry little weight against God's truth, since the name of God must be sanctified everywhere and always, whether by wonders or by the natural order of things.

This pretense could perhaps be more appealing if the Scripture did not inform us about the purpose and legitimate use of miracles. For Mark teaches that the miracles that followed the preaching of the apostles were performed for the confirmation of that preaching (Mark 16:20). Similarly, Luke also recounts that the Lord gave testimony to the word of his grace when signs and wonders were done by the hands of the apostles (Acts 14:3). Very similar to this is the apostle's claim that salvation was confirmed after the proclamation of the gospel, when the Lord also testified to it by signs, wonders, and various mighty works (Heb. 2:[3–]4; Rom. 15[:18–19]). But these things that we hear are seals of the gospel—should we transform them so that they undermine the credibility of the gospel? Or those things that are only intended to attest to the

²⁰ *Jus postliminii*, a Roman legal term referring to the right of citizens captured in war to recover their status and property upon return from captivity.

²¹ Cf. the French: *esbranler et faire douter un esprit*; “shake a mind and cause it to doubt.”

truth—shall we adapt them to confirm lies? Therefore, it is right, in the first place, to investigate and explore the doctrine which, the evangelist says, takes precedence over the miracles. If it proves true, only then ought it legitimately receive confirmation by miracles. But this, based on Christ's authority, is the mark of sound doctrine: it tends to seek the glory of God and not that of human beings (John 5[:41–44]; 7:18; 8:50). Since Christ affirms this test of doctrine, it is wrong to count as miracles things that have any other purpose than to extol the name of God alone [Deut. 13:2–5].²² And we should remember that Satan has his own miracles, which, although they are illusions rather than genuine powers, are such that they can still delude the ignorant and inexperienced (2 Thess. 2:[9–10]). Magicians and enchanters have always been known for miracles. Astonishing miracles have bred idolatry. Nevertheless, they do not confirm for us the superstition of either magicians or idolaters. Long ago, the Donatists²³ used to employ the claim that they worked miracles in abundance as a battering ram to attack the gullibility of the common people. Therefore, we now give the same answer to our opponents that Augustine gave to the Donatists: the Lord cautioned us against these wonder-workers when he predicted that false prophets would arise, who, by deceptive signs and various wonders, would lead the elect into error, if it were possible (Matt. 24:24).^a And Paul has warned us that the kingdom of Antichrist would be accompanied by all power, and signs, and lying wonders (2 Thess. 2:9). But these miracles, they say, are wrought not by idols, or sorcerers, or false prophets, but by saints—as if we did not even know that it is a ruse of Satan to masquerade as angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). In the past, the Egyptians offered sacrifices and other divine honors to Jeremiah,^{b 24} who was buried in their country. Were they not abusing God's holy prophet for idolatry? And yet, from such veneration of his tomb they came to believe that a cure for serpent bites was the well-deserved reward for that veneration. What will we say, except that it has been, and always will be, a

^a Augustine, *Io. ev. tr.* 13[.17, *MPL* 35:1501].

^b Jerome, *Praef. in Ierem.* [incorrect, see note below].

²² The French versions from 1541–1551 refer to Lev. 13, which is an error for Deut. 13.

²³ Donatism was a rigorist sect that arose in fourth-century Africa and practiced rebaptism, based on their claim to be the one true church. The Catholic church condemned their practices as schismatic.

²⁴ The correct reference is Isidore of Seville, *Ort. ob. part.* 38.74, *MPL* 83:143; cf. *OS* 3:17 n. 1.

most righteous punishment of God to send a powerful delusion to those who refused a love for the truth, so that they will believe the lie (2 Thess. 2:10–11). Consequently, we are not at all lacking in miracles; moreover, these miracles are certain and not subject to baseless charges. The miracles our opponents claim for themselves, however, are nothing but illusions from Satan, since they lead the people away from the true worship of their God toward futility (Deut. 13[:2–4]).

In addition, it is by false pretenses that they oppose the fathers against us (I mean the old writers of a better age than today), as if they had the support of those writers for their godlessness.²⁵ If the contest were to be decided by the authority of the fathers, the greater part of the victory—to speak in the most modest terms—would be on our side. But although the writings of those fathers contain much that is excellent and wise, yet in certain matters what commonly happens to human beings has also happened to them. Namely, these devout children of the fathers,²⁶ with all their dexterity of ability, judgment, and mind, revere only their mistakes and errors, and overlook what the fathers have said well, dissimulate about it, or corrupt it. Thus, you could say their only concern has been to glean dross from gold.²⁷ Then, they bury us with wicked accusations, as despisers and enemies of the fathers. But we do not despise the fathers; in fact, if it fit with my present purpose, I could effortlessly prove most of what we are saying today with their backing. Nevertheless, we study their writings in such a way that we always remember that all things are there to serve us, not to have dominion over us, and that we belong to Christ alone and must obey him in everything, without exception (1 Cor. 3:21[–23]). Anyone who does not maintain this distinction will have nothing settled in religion, since those holy men were ignorant of many things: they frequently disagree with each other, and sometimes even contradict themselves. It is for good reason, they say, that

²⁵ On this subject, see A.N.S. Lane, “Calvin's Use of the Fathers and the Medievals,” *JCSF*, 15–66.

²⁶ That is, those who imagine themselves to be children of the church fathers.

²⁷ *in auro legere stercora*. Cf. the anecdote that Cassiodorus relates about Vergil, who, when asked why he read the early and sometimes unrefined poet Ennius, responded, “I am looking for gold amid the dross” (*Aurum in stercore quaero*). Note that in both cases, the term *stercus*, which primarily means “excrement,” is used in its secondary sense of “dross,” though retaining the pungent sense of the primary meaning. See Ennius, *Testimonia*, *LCL* 294:88–89; Cassiodorus, *Inst.* 1, *MPL* 70:1112; cf. the Eng. trans. by Halporn, 114.

Solomon admonishes us not to transgress the ancient boundary stones that our fathers have set in place (Prov. 22:28).²⁸ But the rule for the boundaries of fields is not the same as the one for the obedience of faith, which should be so unquestioning that we forget our people and our father's house (Ps. 45:10). But if they are so eager to allegorize (ἀλληγορίζειν), why do they not interpret the "fathers," who appointed boundary markers that are unlawful to tear down, as the apostles, rather than anyone else? For this is how Jerome, whose words they have referred to in their canons, has interpreted the "fathers."²⁹ But if they insist on preserving the boundary markers of the persons they have in mind, why do they themselves so freely transgress them whenever they feel like it?

There was one of the church fathers who said that our God neither eats nor drinks, and therefore needs neither cups nor dishes;^c another said that the sacred rites³⁰ do not need gold, and that they do not take pleasure in gold, since they are not purchased with gold.^d Therefore, they transgress this boundary when, in their sacred rites,³¹ they are so delighted with gold, silver, ivory, marble, gems, and silks, and when they think that God is not rightly worshipped unless everything is dripping with exquisite splendor, or rather senseless luxury.

There was a father who said that he freely partook of meat on a day when others abstained from it, for the very reason that he was a Christian.^e They violate these limits, therefore, when they pronounce curses³² on the soul who takes a bite of meat during Lent.³³

c Acacius of Amida, in Cassiodorus, *H.t.* 11.16, [MPL 69:1198; cf. Socrates, *H.e.* 7.21, *NPNF2* 2:164].

d Ambrose, *Off.* 2.28[.138, *MPL* 16:140; *NPNF2* 10:64].

e Spyridon of Tremithus, in Cassiodorus, *H.t.* 1.10, [MPL 69:894–895].

28 Johannes Cochlaeus is an example of one who used this argument against the protestants (specifically Melanchthon), *De libero arbitrio*, 1, fol. B4 v°.

29 See Gratian, *Decretum*, 2.24.Q3.33, *MPL* 187:1307–1308; Friedberg, 1:999.

30 French: *les Sacremens*; "the sacraments."

31 French: *cérémonies*; "ceremonies."

32 French: *excommunient*; "excommunicate."

33 The Reformers did not object to fasting; the Augsburg Confession, art. 26, commends fasts for the practice of spiritual discipline (mortification) but rejects them as an obligation and especially as a meritorious work to the detriment of grace; see *BC*, 62. Calvin treats the matter of fasting, including the benefit of public, corporate fasting, in detail below, 4.12.14–21; cf. Mentzer, "Fasting, Piety, and Political Anxiety."

One father said that a monk who does not labor with his hands is considered to be on the same level as a violent man, or if you prefer, a robber.^f And another said that it is unlawful for monks to live on another person's resources, no matter how diligent they are in contemplation, prayer, and study.^g They have also transgressed this boundary when they have placed lazy monks, with their bellies like wine-casks, in brothels and dens of iniquity,³⁴ to be fattened on the resources of others.

There was a father who said that to see a painted image of Christ, or of any saint, in the temples of Christians, is a dreadful abomination.^h³⁵ Nor did only one individual say this; it was also decreed by an ecclesiastical council that an object of worship should not be painted on the walls.ⁱ³⁶ They are quite far from keeping themselves within these limits, since they have not left a single corner free of images.

Another father advised that, after having paid our respects³⁷ to the dead in burial, we should leave them to their rest.^j They burst through these boundaries when they instill a perpetual anxiety about the dead.³⁸

There was a father who asserted that the substance of bread and wine in the Eucharist remains and does not vanish, just as the substance of the human nature remains in Christ the Lord when united with the divine nature.^k They transgress this limit, consequently, who imagine that once the words of the Lord are recited, the substance of bread and wine vanishes, to be transubstantiated into his body and blood.³⁹

f Cassiodorus, *H.t.* 8.1, [MPL 69:1103–1104].

g Augustine, *Op. Mon.*, 17, [MPL 40:564].

h Epiphanius, *Ep. ad Joannem Hierosolymitanum*, [9,] translated by Jerome.

i The Synod of Elvira, c. A.D. 305–306, canon 36 [Mansi 2:264].

j Ambrose, *Abr.*, 1.9[.80, *MPL* 14:449].

k Gelasius, *Concil. Rom.* [= Tractatus III: De duabis naturis in Christo, 14, in Thiel, ed., *Epistolae Romanorum pontificum*, 1:541–542].

34 The French adds: *ce sont leurs cloistres*; "these are their cloisters."

35 As Calvin's citation notes, Jerome translated this letter into Latin (*Ep.* 51). See *MPL* 22:526–527; *MPG* 43:390–392; *CSEL* 54:411; cf. *NPNF2* 6:88–89.

36 See Grigg, "Aniconic Worship."

37 *officium humanitatis*, a duty of kindness, often used in the context of burial.

38 That is, the practice of prayers and masses for the dead, which follow from the doctrine of purgatory.

39 This final phrase regarding transubstantiation is lacking in the French, as are the following three sentences.

There were fathers who, when they exhibited to the universal church only one Eucharist, and therefore, although they prohibited scandalous and degenerate persons access to it, they most severely condemned all who, while present, did not partake of it.¹⁴⁰ How far have they moved these boundaries? For they fill not only the churches but even private houses with their masses and admit anyone at all to watch them as spectators. The more they pay, the more welcome they are, no matter how impure and wicked they may be. They invite no one to faith in Christ or to a faithful participation in the sacraments, but rather try to sell their own work in place of the grace and merit of Christ.

There was one father who decreed that those who were content to partake in one kind and abstain from the other⁴¹ should be barred completely from the use of Christ's sacred supper,^m and another who forcefully contended that the blood of their Lord must not be denied to Christian people who are commanded to shed their own blood in order to confess him.ⁿ In a similar way, they abolished these boundaries when they required by an inviolable law precisely

¹ Chrysostom, *In Eph. hom.* on Eph. 1[:15–20, homily 3.4–5, *MPG* 62:28–30, *NPNF1* 13:63–65].

^m Pope Gelasius in Gratian, *Decretum*, 3.2[.12, *MPL* 187:1736; Friedberg, 1:1318].

ⁿ Cyprian, *Epist.* 2 [= 57.2; *MPL* 3:856; *CSEL* 3.2:652; *ANF* (Letter 53) 5:337].

⁴⁰ In addition, Calvin refers to “Calixtus papa de consecrat. distin. 2,” but *OS* 3:20 n. 1 identifies the reference as Gratian's citation of “Pope Martin”: “If someone enters the church of God, and listens to the sacred Scriptures, and for the sake of one's luxury abstains from the sacrament of communion, and in the observance of the mysteries declines the established rule of discipline, such a person we determine must be expelled from the catholic church, until they repent, and demonstrate the fruits of repentance, so they can, by receiving communion, be worthy of pardon.” [*Corpus Iuris Canonici* 3.2.18, *MPL* 187:1739; Friedberg 1:1320]. Note that while the text of *Corpus Iuris Canonici* refers to “Martinus Papa,” the actual referent is Martin of Braga (Bracarenensis); see his *Capitula sive canones ex Orientalium antiquorum Patrum*, 83; *MPL* 84:586. However, while this text is relevant, 3.2.10 is the correct referent. There, Pope Anacletus declares, “After the consecration all are to communicate, who do not wish to be excommunicated. This is what the apostles established, and what the holy Roman church maintains.” In the first printed edition of the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (Strasbourg, 1471; see Friedberg 1:LXXV–LXXVI), republished numerous times in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Anacletus was misidentified as Calixtus; see Friedberg, 1:1317, “Notationes correctorum.”

⁴¹ It had become the common practice for laypersons to receive only the bread and not the wine in the Eucharist. An earlier Reformer, Jan Hus (c. 1369–1415), condemned the practice of withholding the cup from the laity, among other practices; he was condemned and executed at the Council of Constance (1414–1418). The Hussite or ultraquist movement in Bohemia resulted in the Hussite wars that occurred between 1419 and 1434. Calvin discusses the matter of communion in both kinds below, 4.17.47.

that which the former father punished with excommunication and the latter disapproved with a sound argument.⁴²

There was a father who asserted that it was rash to decide an obscure matter one way or the other without clear and evident testimonies of Scripture.^o They forgot this limit when they made so many constitutions, canons, and doctrinal determinations⁴³ without any authorization from the Word of God.

There was a father who censured Montanus for being the first to impose laws for fasting, among other heresies.^p ⁴⁴ They have gone far beyond this boundary as well when they decree fasts by the strictest laws.⁴⁵

There was a father who denied that marriage should be forbidden for ministers of the church, and asserted that chastity meant to be intimate with one's own wife,^q and there were fathers who agreed with his judgment.⁴⁶ They have transgressed these limits by demanding the strictest celibacy from those who offer the sacrifice of the mass.⁴⁷

There was a father who held the opinion that we should heed Christ alone, of whom it is said, “Listen to him.” He thought that we are not to look to what others before us have said or done, but only what Christ has commanded, who is foremost over all.^r When they prefer to set up any teachers other than Christ as authorities over themselves and others, they neither maintain this boundary for themselves, nor do they allow others to maintain it.

There was a father who contended that the church ought not to put itself before Christ, because he always judges truthfully, while ecclesiastical judges

^o Augustine, *Pecc. mer.* 2[.36, *MPL* 44:186].

^p Apollonius, in Eusebius, *H.e.*, 5.18[.2, *MPG* 20:475–476; *GCS* 9.1:472–473; *NPNF2* 1:235].

^q Paphnutius of Thebes, in Cassiodorus, *H.l.*, 2.14, [*MPL* 69:933–934 (= Sozomen, *H.e.* 1.23); *NPNF2* 2:256].

^r Cyprian, *Epist.* 63[.14, *MPL* 4:385; *CSEL* 3.2:712; *ANF* 5:362].

⁴² The Council of Constance (1414–1418), session 13, prohibited priests from administering the Eucharist to the laity under both kinds, that is, serving them both the bread and the wine. See Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:418–419.

⁴³ *magistrales determinationes*, a technical term for the definitive solution that a master provides at the end of an academic disputation.

⁴⁴ In the later second century, Montanus founded a morally rigorous, ascetic, prophetic, and apocalyptic sect, which was condemned by the early church, though Tertullian joined the sect later in his life.

⁴⁵ See Gratian, *Decretum*, 3.3.3–16, *MPL* 187:1783–1786; Friedberg, 1:1353–1357.

⁴⁶ See Gratian, *Decretum*, 1.28:14–17, *MPL* 187:162–164; Friedberg, 1:105–106.

⁴⁷ See Gratian, *Decretum*, 1.28:1–13, *MPL* 187:155–162; Friedberg, 1:98–105.

often make mistakes, since they are human beings.^s They crash through this boundary as well and do not hesitate to assert that the authority of Scripture depends entirely on the judgment of the church. All the fathers with one heart cursed, and with one voice detested, the contamination of the Holy Word of God by the subtle tricks of the sophists and its entanglement in the disputes of the dialecticians. Or do they really confine themselves within these limits, when they work at nothing in their whole lives but to obscure and impede the simplicity of Scripture with endless controversies, and with disputes that are worse than sophistical? If the fathers were now brought back to life and heard a method of disputing, such as what those people call speculative theology, they would not suspect that they were disputing about God at all.

But if I wanted to list how brazenly the yoke of the fathers is shaken off by those who would like to come across as their dutiful children, our address would go too far beyond the reasonable limits set for it. I would no doubt run out of months and years. And yet their nerve is so depraved and deplorable, that they dare to censure us for not hesitating to transgress the ancient boundaries.

But even their demand that we yield to custom has no effect. In fact, it would do us the greatest injustice to force us to yield to custom. Certainly, if human judgments were right, custom would be derived from good persons. But the reality is fairly often very different. What is observed to be practiced by many soon obtains the force of custom. However, human affairs have hardly ever gone so well that what was best was acceptable to the majority. Therefore, public error, or rather a common consensus of vices, has generally arisen from the private vices of the multitude, which those “good men” now want to establish as law. It is evident to all who have eyes that the world is inundated with more than one sea of evils, that it is overrun with numerous destructive plagues, that everything is rushing headlong into ruin. Consequently, we must either completely despair of human affairs, or take control over such great evils—or rather oppose them by force. And this remedy is rejected for no other reason than that we have been accustomed to these evils for so long. But while public error certainly has a foothold in human society, yet in the kingdom of God nothing but his eternal truth should be heard and seen, a truth that no

^s Augustine, *Cresc.* 2[.21, *MPL* 43:482; *CSEL* 52:385].

succession of years, no custom, no conspiracy, can dictate.^t Thus, Isaiah once taught the elect of God not to call conspiracy everything that the people were calling conspiracy; that is, that they should not join in a conspiracy together with the wicked consensus of the people, nor fear or dread what they fear, but rather they should sanctify the Lord of Hosts and he should be their fear and their dread (Isa. 8:12[–13]).

Now then, let them raise past ages and present examples as an objection against us however much they want; if we sanctify the Lord of Hosts, we will not be very afraid. For if it is the case that multiple ages have simultaneously concurred in the same kind of ungodliness, he has the power to take vengeance on the third and fourth generation. Or if it is the case that the whole world conspires together in the same iniquity, he has taught us by experience about the fate of those who sin with the crowd when he destroyed the entire human race with the flood but saved Noah with his small family, who, by his faith, the faith of one person, condemned the whole world (Gen. 7:1; Heb. 11:7). In short, a corrupt custom is no different than a plague epidemic, in which those who fall along with the masses nonetheless still die. Moreover, the remark that Cyprian makes somewhere should have been considered: persons who sin through ignorance, although they cannot be completely absolved from fault, could still be considered somewhat excusable; but those who obstinately reject the truth offered by God’s goodness have nothing to plead as an excuse.^u

They do not so powerfully pressure us by their dilemma that we are forced to concede either that the church had been extinct for some time, or that we are now in a dispute with the church. Certainly, the church of Christ has lived, and will continue to live, as long as Christ reigns at the right hand of the Father, by whose hand it is sustained, and by whose protection it is defended, by whose power it maintains its safety. For there is no doubt that he will do what he once promised: to be with his people until the consummation of the age (Matt. 28:20). We do not now have any conflict with *this* church, for with the common consent of the whole community of the faithful we worship and adore the one

^t Gratian, *Decretum*, 1.8[.5, 9, *MPL* 187:46–48; Friedberg 1:14–16, and the supplementary papal constitution of John XXII, *Extravagantes Decretales*, 1.1, Friedberg 2:1237; cf. *OS* 3:521, addenda.

^u Cyprian, *Epist.* 63.17, [*MPL* 4:387; *CSEL* 3.2:715; *ANF* 5:363]; and *Epist.* 73[.13, *MPL* 3:1117; *CSEL* 3.2:787; *ANF* 5:382].

God and Christ the Lord (1 Cor. 8[:6]), as all the devout have always adored him. But our opponents deviate widely from the truth when they acknowledge no church except the one that they see right before their eyes, and when they try to confine it within these limits, in which it cannot at all be contained.

Our controversy hinges on the following points: First, they contend that the form of the church is always manifest and visible. Second, they locate the very form of the church in the see of the Roman Church and in the order of their prelates.⁴⁸ We contend, on the contrary, that the church can exist without any visible form, and that its form does not consist in that external splendor they so foolishly admire. Instead, it is defined by a very different mark, namely, the pure preaching of the Word of God and the correct administration of the sacraments.⁴⁹

They growl if the church cannot always be pointed out with a finger. But how often did it happen among the Jewish people that the church was so deformed that it had no visible form left? What form do we suppose shone brightly when Elijah lamented that he was the only one left (1 Kings 19[:10, 14])? How long, after the coming of Christ, did it lay hidden, without form? How often, since that time, have wars, factions, and heresies so oppressed the church, that there was not the least glimmer of it? If our opponents had lived during that time, would they have believed that the church existed at all?

Yet Elijah heard that there were seven thousand men reserved who had not bowed the knee to Baal [1 Kings 19:18]. Nor should we have any doubt that Christ has always reigned on earth from the time he ascended to heaven. But if the faithful had required any visually discernible form at that time, would they not have been immediately discouraged? In fact, already in his day, Hilary considered it a grievous error that people were engrossed in foolish admiration of episcopal grandeur and failed to perceive the deadly Lerna⁵⁰ concealed under

⁴⁸ That is, the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

⁴⁹ See below, 4.1.9.

⁵⁰ Erasmus lists among his adages “a Lerna of troubles” (Λέρνη κακῶν), which, he notes, means “an accumulation of many ills all piled up on one another.” Citing classical sources, Erasmus observes that Lerna was a lake or region into which people cast all sorts of refuse, with the result that noxious vapors arose from it. It was also the home of the Hydra, the monster with regenerating heads that Heracles (Hercules) defeated with Greek fire, though Calvin uses the image here and elsewhere (cf. 3.4.18, below) to refer to a toxic pile of troubles. Erasmus, *Adagia*, 1.3.27, *CWE* 31:258.

that mask. For he writes: “I have one warning for you: beware of the Antichrist; for it is wrong that the love of walls has captivated you. It is wrong that you venerate the church of God in houses and buildings; it is wrong that you push the word ‘peace’ in them. Is there any uncertainty that the Antichrist will set himself up in them?”⁵¹ For me, mountains, forests, lakes, prisons, and chasms are safer, for the prophets prophesied while dwelling or being hidden in these places.⁵² But what does the world venerate today in their horned bishops,⁵² except that they consider those they see presiding over major cities to be holy prelates of religion? Away, then, with such stupid admiration.

Rather, let us leave this to the Lord, since he alone knows who are his own (2 Tim. 2:18), he may also sometimes take the external knowledge of his church away from human view. I admit that this is a dreadful vengeance of God upon the earth; but if human godlessness deserves it, why do we work so hard to resist the righteous retribution of God? This is how the Lord punished human ingratitude in former ages. For, because they failed to obey his truth and extinguished his light, he permitted them, their senses blinded, both to be deluded by absurd falsehoods and submerged in profound darkness. Consequently, no appearance of the true church remained to be seen. Yet, at the same time, amid darkness and errors, he preserved his scattered and concealed people from destruction. And no wonder, for he knew how to save even in the turmoil of Babylon, and the flame of the fiery furnace.

They, however, want to evaluate the form of the church by who knows how much pointless ostentation. How dangerous this is I will briefly indicate, rather than narrate at length, to avoid extending this discussion excessively. The Pope, they say, who holds the Apostolic See, and the bishops⁵³ whom he has anointed

v Hilary of Poitiers, c. *Aux.* [12, *MPL* 10:616].

⁵¹ See below, 4.2.12, where Calvin cites Daniel 9:27 and 2 Thess. 2:4; cf. 4.7.25 and 29, 4.9.4.

⁵² The headwear of a bishop is the miter, which has two rising points, known as horns (*cornua mitrae*). This led to identifications of a corrupt or apostate episcopacy with the horned beasts and dragons of the book of Revelation, e.g. the beast ridden by a woman in ch. 17, which was depicted in Protestant art as a symbol of the papacy. Calvin frequently uses this epithet, e.g., in his treatise *The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church*, CO 7:632; *Tracts* 3:292.

⁵³ *antistites*, a term that originally meant “high priest,” later applied to bishops, archbishops, and the pope. It was also a title applied to the highest leader of the Swiss Reformed Churches (of the more Zwinglian variety) in Zurich and Basel, including the Reformers Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bullinger.

and consecrated, as long as they are distinguished by miters and crosiers, represent the church, and one ought to consider them to be the church. Therefore, they cannot err. Why is this so? Because they are pastors of the church and consecrated to the Lord. Were not Aaron and the other leaders of Israel also pastors? Although they were appointed as priests, Aaron and his sons still fell into error when they made the calf (Ex. 32:4). Why, according to this line of reasoning, could the four hundred prophets who lied to Ahab not have represented the church (1 Kings 22:12)? But the church stood on the side of Micaiah, solitary and despised as he was, yet from his mouth proceeded the truth. Did those prophets not carry both the name and appearance of the church, when they rose up in a single assault against Jeremiah and hurled threats, claiming that the law could not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet (Jer. 18:18)? Jeremiah is sent alone against the whole class of prophets with a denunciation from the Lord, that the law would perish from the priest, and counsel from the wise, and the word from the prophet (Jer. 4:9). Was it not a similar splendor that shone brightly in that council that the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees⁵⁴ convened to deliberate about putting Christ to death (John 11[:47–53])?

Now, let them go and cling to the external mask, and so make Christ and all the prophets of God schismatics, and, conversely, make the ministers of Satan instruments of the Holy Spirit. But if they would express their real sentiments, let them answer me in good faith: Among which people, or in what place, did do they think the church resided, after Eugene, by decree of the Council of Basel, had been removed and deposed from the pontificate and Amadeus⁵⁵ had been elected in his place?⁵⁶ They cannot deny, without exploding with effort,

⁵⁴ Cf. the French: *Prestres, Docteurs et religieux*, “priests, teachers, and religious.”

⁵⁵ French: *Aymé, duc de Savoye*, “Amadeus, Duke of Savoy.”

⁵⁶ The Council of Basel (1431–1449) was the final chapter in the struggle over the supreme authority in the church, between those who located that authority in a general council and those who located it in the office of the papacy. This episode produced another brief papal schism, following upon the Western Schism of 1378 to 1417. The Council moved to limit papal authority, and these moves were denounced by Pope Eugene IV. The Council deposed him in 1439 and appointed the Duke of Savoy, Amadeus VIII, as pope, who took the name Felix V. Ultimately, Eugene received the support of Christian nations that were weary of papal schisms, and Felix abdicated in 1449, effectively ending the conciliar movement. Cf. Luther on the incident, *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, in *LW* 41:265–268; *WA* 54:208–210. And see Christianson et al., *The Church, the Councils, and Reform*.

that the Council was legitimate in terms of external procedures and that it was summoned not only by one pope, but by two.⁵⁷ There Eugene was condemned for schism, rebellion, and obstinacy, together with the whole band of cardinals and bishops who had joined him in attempting to dissolve the Council. Yet afterwards, assisted by the favor of the princes, the papacy was safely restored to him. That election of Amadeus, though duly enacted by the authority of a general and holy synod, vanished into smoke—except that he was appeased with a cardinal’s hat, like a treat thrown to a barking dog. All the popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, and priests who have lived ever since have proceeded from the bosom of those rebellious, obstinate heretics.

Here, caught in the act, they are inevitably trapped. For on which of the two parties should they bestow the title “church”? Will they deny that this was a general council, which lacked nothing in external majesty? Certainly, it was solemnly convoked by two papal bulls, consecrated by a presiding legate of the Roman see, properly regulated in all respects, and it has consistently retained the same authority to the end. Will our adversaries admit that Eugene, with all his cronies, was a schismatic, through whom they themselves were all consecrated?

Consequently, either they must define the form of the church in a different manner, or, no matter how numerous they may be, we will consider them all schismatics, who—knowingly and willingly—have been ordained by heretics. But if it had never been discovered before that the church is not tied to outward displays of ostentation, they themselves can constitute abundant proof of it for us. For so long, they have arrogantly kept on hawking themselves to the world under the respectable title, “The Church,” although they were at the same time lethal plagues on the church. I am not speaking of their morals and the tragic crimes that gush from their entire lives, since they claim to be Pharisees, who are to be listened to, not imitated.⁵⁸ This doctrine, the very doctrine on which they base their claim to be the church,⁵⁹ is a deadly executioner of souls,⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Namely, Popes Martin V and his successor Eugene IV.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Eck, *Enchiridion*, cap. 2, fol. B iv r°.

⁵⁹ French: *pour laquelle ils veulent estre recogneuz pour l'Eglise*; “for which they want to be recognized as the church.”

⁶⁰ French: *une cruelle gehenne et boucherie des âmes*; “a cruel Gehenna and butchery of souls.” “Gehenna” refers to the rack, a device of torture.

the torching, downfall, and demolition of the church. You will clearly see this if you set aside some of your spare time to read our teachings.

Finally, they are not entirely forthcoming when they maliciously point out how many troubles, disturbances, and controversies the preaching of our doctrine has brought with it, and the effect they now have on many people. For they unfairly shift the blame for those evils to our doctrine—blame that they ought to have redirected to the malice of Satan. This is, so to speak, a characteristic of the divine Word, that when it appears, Satan never remains calm and sleeping. This is the most certain—and the particularly trustworthy—criterion that distinguishes it from deceptive doctrines, which easily betray themselves, since everyone's ears are receptive to them, and since the world listens to them with applause. Thus, for several centuries, when all things were immersed in profound darkness, the lord of this world had nearly all mortals for his fun and games. Just like a certain Sardanapalus,⁶¹ he sat idle and enjoyed his delights in the utmost peace; for what else would he have had to do, besides laugh and amuse himself in the quiet and peaceful possession of his kingdom? But when the light shining from above dispelled his darkness somewhat—when that strong man⁶² had harried and stricken his kingdom—only then did he begin to shake off his customary laziness and to take up arms. And first of all, he stirred up the force of men to violently suppress the light of truth as it was dawning. And when this proved ineffectual, he turned to treachery. He provoked divisions and doctrinal controversies through his Anabaptists⁶³ and other scoundrels' monstrosities, in order to obscure and eventually extinguish the light of the truth. And now he continues to attack it with both engines of war:⁶⁴ for he attempts to uproot

⁶¹ Diodorus of Sicily depicts Sardanapalus (Assurbanipal), King of Syria, as an effeminate and bisexual hedonist whose licentiousness led to his downfall, *Bibl. hist.* 2.23, LCL 279:424–429. The identification of Sardanapalus and the reliability of this depiction are uncertain. Luther mentions him in his expositions of Gen. 25:17 and Ps. 90; in the latter he says of those devoted to leisure and pleasure: “They are guided by the well-known but perverted sentiment found on the epitaph of Sardanapalus [sic]: ‘Eat, drink, play; there is no pleasure after death.’” *LW* 13:76; *WA* 40.3:486. Notably, in reference to the King's moral decadence, Calvin refers to Francis I as Sardanapalus in two letters, to Guillaume Farel, Feb. 20, 1546, and to Jacques de Bourgogne, seigneur de Falais, Feb. 25, 1547, *CO* 12:295, 492; *Letters*, 2:22, 86.

⁶² *fortis ille*, which seems to be a reference to the strong man and the stronger man in Luke 11:21–22.

⁶³ *Catabaptistae*, another term for Anabaptists.

⁶⁴ Calvin uses the imagery of siege engines (*machina*) to represent the Devil's stratagems.

this true seed through human force and violence, and he strives with all his might to inundate it with his tares, so that it cannot grow or produce fruit. Nevertheless, his attempts will be in vain if we listen to the Lord, the one who warns us. Long ago, he also exposed Satan's schemes to us, so that he might not catch us by surprise, and he armed us with sufficiently strong defenses against all his engines of war.

Moreover, what great malice does it take to blame the very Word of God for the seditions that the wicked and rebellious incite against it or for the sects instigated by frauds? Yet it is not the first example of this. Elijah was asked if he was not the one who was troubling Israel (1 Kings 18[:17]). The Jews considered Christ seditious (Luke 23[:5]; John 19[:7]). The apostles were accused of agitating the people (Acts 24[:5–8]). Are they doing anything different, those who today hold us responsible for all the disturbances, turmoil, and controversies that are bubbling up among us? But Elijah has taught us how to answer such people, namely, that we are not the ones sowing errors or provoking turmoil; rather, they themselves are resisting the power of God (1 Kings 18:18).

But just as this one reply is enough to deflect their arrogance, so it can also counteract the weakness of others who often happen to be disturbed by such stumbling-blocks and to waver because of their troubled state of mind. So that they may not stumble and be thrown off balance due to this distress, they should, however, know that the apostles in their day experienced the same things that are now happening to us. There were unlearned and unstable persons who, to their own destruction, distorted the things that Paul had written by divine inspiration, as Peter says (2 Pet. 3:16). There were despisers of God, who, when they heard that sin abounded so that grace would be even more abundant, immediately jumped to the conclusion: We will continue in sin, so that grace may abound. When they heard that believers were not under the law, they immediately croaked: We will sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 3[:5–8]; 6:1, 15). There were some who accused Paul of being an advocate of evil. Many false apostles slipped in to demolish the churches he had built (1 Cor. 1[:10–17]; 2 Cor. 11[:3–5]; Gal. 1[:6–9]). Some preached the gospel out of envy and strife, not sincerely—in fact, even maliciously—intending to make his chains heavier with distress

(Phil. 1:15[–17]). In some places, the gospel had little effect.⁶⁵ All were seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2[:21]). Others returned like dogs to their vomit, and like swine to wallowing in the mud (2 Pet. 2[:22]). A great many seized upon the liberty of the Spirit as a license for the flesh (2 Pet. 2[:18–19]). Many false⁶⁶ brothers infiltrated, exposing the godly to dangers (2 Cor. 11[:3–4]). Various controversies arose among the brethren themselves (Acts chs. 6, 11, 15).

What were the apostles to do here? Should they not have dissimulated for a time, or rather discarded and deserted that gospel because they saw it was a hotbed of so many disputes, the cause of so many dangers, and the occasion of so many offenses? But in difficulties such as these, it occurred to them that Christ is the stone of stumbling, and the rock of offense, set in place for the fall and rising again of many, and as a sign that would be spoken against (Luke 2:34; Is. 8[:14]; Rom. 9[:33]; 1 Pet. 2[:8]). And armed with this confidence, they proceeded boldly through all the dangers of disturbances and offenses. The same thought should also sustain us, since Paul attests that it is the enduring character of the gospel to be an aroma of death leading to death for those who are perishing (2 Cor. 2[:15–]16). However, for us, the gospel was instead intended to serve as an aroma of life leading to life, and the power of God for the salvation of those who believe. We would certainly also experience it as such, if we did not corrupt this exceptional gift of God by our ingratitude, and pervert to our ruin what ought to be the sole stronghold of salvation for us.

But I return to you, Sire. Do not let those groundless accusations that our adversaries use in attempting to terrify you move you at all, namely, that by this “new gospel” (as they call it) we are merely hunting and striving for nothing but an opportunity for seditions and impunity for every sort of crime. For our God is not the author of dissension, but of peace (1 Cor. 14[:33]); nor is the Son of God a minister of sin, since he came to destroy the works of the devil (Gal. 2[:17]; 1 John 3[:8]).

⁶⁵ The editions of 1536 and 1539 indicate in the margin: “In the Epistles to the Corinthians and to Timothy.”

⁶⁶ Reading *falsi*, an omission listed in the errata of the 1536 edition, 519; cf. French: *faux freres*; “false brothers.”

And we are accused of such ambitions unjustly, since we have never given the least cause for suspicion. Obviously, we were plotting the overthrow of kingdoms—we from whom a seditious word was never heard; we whose lives were always known to be peaceful and honest while we lived under your government. And even now, in our exile from home, we do not cease to pray for every prosperity for you and your kingdom. Obviously, we were seeking to wallow in vices with impunity—we whose conduct, though many faults could be found, is not at all worthy of such a severe assault. We have not made such poor progress in the gospel (thanks to God) that our lives could not provide those detractors with an example of chastity, generosity, mercy, discretion, patience, moderation, and every other virtue.⁶⁷ In fact, it is completely obvious that we sincerely fear and worship God, whose name we seek to sanctify with both our life and our death. And envy itself is compelled to attest to the innocence and civic integrity⁶⁸ of some of us who were punished by death for the very thing that should have been rewarded with exceptional praise. But if there are any who are using the gospel as a pretext for inciting disturbances (though persons of that kind have not been seen in your kingdom as of yet), if there are any who are using the liberty of God’s grace as a pretext for giving license to their own vices (I know a great many of this kind), there are laws and legal penalties, by which they can be severely punished according to what they deserve. Only do not let the gospel of God be blamed for the malice of wicked persons in the meantime. Sire, the toxic iniquity of our false accusers is so sufficiently laid out before you, with many examples, that you should not give an ear to their denunciations with too much credence. I even fear that I have gone into too much detail, given that this preface is already close to the length of a full apology, despite the fact that I did not intend for it to comprise our entire defense, but simply to give you a more open mind beforehand so that you listen to the actual pleading of our case. For, although your mind is now unfavorable to us, estranged from us, and even inflamed against us, yet

⁶⁷ Herminjard (4:22 n.7) observes: “These words are confirmed by the testimonies of good repute that the magistrates of Strasbourg, Basel and Berne gave at that time to French refugees. See the letter of July 8, 1536 and the instructions that the ambassadors from the evangelical states received in January 1537.” (Herminjard, 4:70–73, 169–172).

⁶⁸ French: *iustice extérieure*; “outward rectitude.”

we are confident that we can regain your favor, if you will read this confession of ours, which we intend as our defense before your Majesty, just once, calmly and with composure.⁶⁹ But if your ears are so filled with the mutterings of vindictive persons that there is no opportunity for the accused to speak for themselves, and if those ruthless fiends continuously vent their rage through imprisonments, whippings, tortures, maiming, and burnings—with you turning a blind eye—then we will indeed, like sheep destined for slaughter, be reduced to every extreme circumstance. Nevertheless, it will happen in such a way that, in patience, we might retain possession of our souls (Luke 21[:19]) and wait for the mighty hand of the Lord, which will undoubtedly appear in time, and reveal itself armed both for the deliverance of the poor from their affliction, and also to wreak vengeance upon their despisers, who now gloat in complete immunity. Most Illustrious King: May the Lord, the King of kings, establish your throne with justice, and your rule with equity.

Basel, August 23, 1535.⁷⁰

BOOK I

ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THE CREATOR

⁶⁹ French: *hors d'indignation et courroux*; “without indignation and wrath.”

⁷⁰ In the 1559 edition the letter bears the erroneous date of August 1, 1536, which would have been five months later than the first publication of the *Institutes*. The correct day is given in the 1536 edition (*X Calendas Septembres*, i.e., August 23) and in the French editions of 1541 and 1545, and the correct year appears in the French editions (*mil cinq cent trente cinq*). See OS 3:30 n. 1.

CHAPTER I

The Knowledge of God and of Ourselves Is Connected. How They Are Related to Each Other.

1.

Nearly the whole sum of our wisdom that can ultimately be considered true and substantial wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.¹ However, because they are interconnected by so many links, which of the two precedes and gives rise to the other is not easy to discern. For, in the first place, no one can observe themselves without turning their attention immediately to the contemplation of God, in whom they live and move. For it is utterly clear that the gifts we possess in abundance are not at all from ourselves; on the contrary, even our very existence² is nothing but a subsistence in God alone. Secondly, these benefits, which trickle drop-by-drop from heaven down to us, lead us like little streams to the source. And in fact, our lack of means makes even more apparent the infinite goodness that rests in God. The miserable ruin into which the rebellion of the first human being

¹ Cf. the French: *c'est qu'en connaissant Dieu, chacun de nous aussi se connait*; "that is, in knowing God, each of us also comes to know oneself."

² French: *mesmes que nos forces et fermeté*; "just as our powers and constancy."

cast us down especially compels us to raise our eyes upward. This is not only so that we may seek what we need from on high because we are hungry and famished, but also, once we are awakened by fear, that we may learn to know our insignificance. For, since there is a virtual world of miseries in the human person, and ever since we were stripped of our divine attire, our shameful nakedness lays bare a tremendous mass of disgrace. Yet³ it is necessary for every individual to be stung with an awareness of their own unhappiness in order to come to at least some knowledge of God. So, from an awareness of our own ignorance, vanity, helplessness, weakness, depravity, and, in short, our corruption, we come to the realization that the true light of wisdom, authentic virtue, the complete abundance of every good, and the purity of righteousness are found only in the Lord. Or rather, our own evils move us to a consideration of the good things of God. Nor are we able to long sincerely for him until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves. For who in the world would not just as well rest satisfied as they are? And really, who does not rest satisfied, as long as they remain unknown to themselves, that is, as long as they are content with their own gifts,⁴ and either unaware of or oblivious to their misery? Consequently, everyone's knowledge of themselves not only prompts people to look for God, but also, so to speak, leads them by the hand to find him.

2.

Conversely, it is clear that no one can attain a sound knowledge of themselves unless they have first contemplated the face of God, and then descend from the contemplation of him to the examination of themselves. For we invariably consider ourselves righteous, whole, wise, and holy—this is the innate pride in all of us—unless we are convinced by indisputable proofs of our unrighteousness, foulness, foolishness, and impurity. But we are never convinced as long as we only turn our attention toward ourselves, and not also toward the Lord, who is the only standard by which that judgment is to be tested. Because we

³ Cf. the French: *d'autre côté*; "on the other hand."

⁴ The French adds: *comme en riches et nobles paremens*; "as with rich and noble accouterments."

all have a natural proclivity to hypocrisy, a sort of empty semblance of righteousness, instead of righteousness itself, abundantly satisfies us. And because there is nothing to be seen in and around us that is not infected by the utmost indecency, we approve of anything that is slightly less foul as if it were perfectly pure, as long as we confine our minds within the boundaries of human pollution. It is precisely like the human eye: If it is exposed to nothing but the color black, it will perceive an object that is really off-white or even speckled with a dark color to be as white as can be.

Indeed, by using the example of a physical sense, we can discern even more clearly how deluded we are when we estimate the abilities of our soul. For if we look down at the ground in the middle of the day, or gaze at things that are visible around us, we think we are endowed with the most powerful and sharpest vision. But when we look up at the sun, and gaze at it with open eyes, that power of sight that was remarkably effective on earth is immediately blinded and bewildered by such brilliance. Therefore, we have to confess that the sharpness of vision that we have when we are viewing earthly things is utterly blunted when directed toward the sun. The same thing happens when we assess our own spiritual assets. For as long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are perfectly content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, and we very happily flatter ourselves and think of ourselves as practically demigods. But once we begin to raise our thinking up to God, and reflect on his attributes⁵ and the absolute perfection of his righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, which is the benchmark to which we must conform ourselves, what earlier pleased us under the false pretext of righteousness we will soon begin to see as the ultimate in wickedness; what amazingly duped us under the label of wisdom will reek like utter foolishness, and what pretended to be moral strength⁶ will turn out to be the most wretched weakness. And this is how poorly what seems to be complete perfection in us corresponds to divine purity.

⁵ *Deum . . . expendere qualis sit*. See n. 7 below on the standard medieval questions about the existence, essence, and qualities of a subject.

⁶ *Virtus* has a broad range of meanings, including "strength." Here Calvin's point is that human virtue (moral strength) is revealed to be weakness (*impotentia*) when compared to God's virtue.

3.

This is the reason for the horror and shock that struck and afflicted the saints whenever they became aware of the presence of God, as Scripture frequently relates. For we see those who stood confident and resolute in the absence of the Lord. But when he manifested his glory, they were so shaken and terrified that they fell to the ground in abject fear of death and were in fact overwhelmed and almost brought to nothing. From this we are to conclude that a person is never sufficiently moved and affected with the knowledge of their own insignificance until they have compared themselves to the majesty of God. We find frequent examples of this dread in the book of Judges and in the prophets, such that this was a common expression among the Lord's people: We will die, because the Lord has appeared to us (Judg. 6[:22–23]; 13:22; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1[:28]–2:1, etc.). For this reason, the account of Job as well, in order to put people in their place by an awareness of their foolishness, moral weakness, and pollution, always derives its strongest argument from a description of the divine wisdom, virtue, and purity. And for good reason, since we see how Abraham, the closer he came to seeing the glory of the Lord, the more readily he acknowledged that he was dirt and dust (Gen. 18:27). And we see how Elijah, his face uncovered, could not bear waiting for the Lord's approaching, because his appearance was so terrifying (1 Kings 19:13). What can a human being do, who is nothing but rot and a worm (Job 7[:5]; 13[:28]; Ps. 22[:6]), since even the cherubim themselves must shield their faces from fear (Isa. 6[:2])? This is plainly what the prophet Isaiah speaks about: The sun will blush, and the moon will be ashamed, when the Lord of Hosts reigns (Isa. 24:23), that is, when he displays his splendor, and brings it nearer, the brightest thing will be obscured by darkness in comparison (Isa. 2:10, 19; 4[:5]; 6[:4]; Joel 2[:10]; 3[:15]). Nevertheless, although the knowledge of God and of ourselves are intimately connected, the right order of teaching⁷ requires that we first take up the former, and then descend to the treatment of the latter.

⁷ *ordo recte docendi*; cf. Muller, *TUC*, 91–98 on Calvin's concern with proper method. Similarly, Philip Melancthon, in his *Elementa rhetorices*, defined dialectics as the *ars recte docendi*; see *CR* 13:424.

CHAPTER II

*What It Is to Know God,
and the Purpose that
Knowing Him Serves*

1.

Now, I understand the knowledge of God to be not only our perception that there is some God, but also that we understand what is important for us to know about him, and what is beneficial for his glory, and finally, how it is useful. For, properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety. Here I am not yet touching on that particular kind of knowledge whereby persons who are lost and accursed in themselves apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator. I am only speaking of that original and simple¹ knowledge to which the innate order of nature would lead us had Adam remained in a state of integrity. For it is true that no one now, in the present ruined state of the human race, will ever perceive God to be a Father, or the Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ intervenes to make him peaceable toward us. Nevertheless, it is one thing to perceive that God our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nurtures us by his goodness, and gives us blessings of every kind; but it is another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation that is set before

¹ *Simplex*; cf. French: *saincte*; "holy."

us in Christ. Thus, the Lord first appears simply as the Creator, both in the formation of the world and in the teaching of Scripture generally, and then later appears in the face of Christ² as the Redeemer. Consequently, from this arises a twofold knowledge of him. We will investigate the first now, and the other will follow in turn.

Moreover, although our minds cannot conceive of God without bestowing some kind of worship on him, it is still not enough simply to perceive that³ he is the only one whom all persons should worship and adore. Rather, we should also be convinced that he is the source of every blessing, so that we look for blessings in him alone. I take this to mean that, as he once created the world, he so sustains it by his immeasurable power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, and especially reigns over the human race in righteousness and justice, puts up with it in mercy, and protects it by his aid. Not only that, but I also take it to mean that nowhere can a drop of wisdom, light, righteousness, power, rectitude, or genuine truth be found that does not flow from him and of which he is not the cause.⁴ Consequently, we should learn from this to hope for and to ask for all these things from him, and, once received, attribute them to him with thanksgiving. For this awareness of God's virtues⁵ is for us an effective teacher of piety, which produces religion.⁶ By *piety*, I mean reverence joined with love for God, which the knowledge of his benefits obtains. For, until people perceive that they owe everything to God, that they are nurtured by his fatherly care, that he is the author of their every good, and that, consequently, nothing is to be sought apart from him, they will never submit to him with voluntary devotion. On the contrary, unless they place all their happiness in him, they will never yield their entire selves to him truly and from the heart.

2 *in Christi facie*. This phrase is also used in the Vulgate translation of 2 Cor. 4:6, which speaks of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus."

3 Cf. the French: *toutesfois il ne suffira point de savoir en confus qu'il y ait quelque Dieu*; "however, it will not be enough to know in confusion that there is some God."

4 In the 1536 ed., p. 42, there is a similar passage, later revised, in which Calvin cites Baruch 3[:12–14] and James 1[:17].

5 Or powers or perfections (*virtutes*) of God, equivalent to the divine attributes. See Muller, *DGLTT*, s.v. *virtutes Dei* and *attributa divina*.

6 On the term *religio*, see Muller, *PRRD* 1:166–167.

2.

And consequently, those who propose to dwell on the question: "What is God?"⁷ are merely fooling around with pointless speculations, since it is more important for us to know what God is like⁸ and what is consistent with his nature. For what would be the point of acknowledging, like Epicurus did, some God who, having tossed aside concern for the world, merely amuses himself in laziness?⁹ And, ultimately, what good is it to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? On the contrary, our knowledge of him ought to be useful, first of all, for teaching us fear and reverence. In addition, we should learn from this knowledge, as our guide and teacher, to pray to him for every blessing and to credit him for what we have received. For how could you even have a thought about God without immediately and simultaneously calling to mind that, since you are his creature, you are subject and bound to his authority by right of creation?¹⁰ That you owe him your life? That whatever you attempt, whatever you do, should be credited to him? If this is so, then it certainly follows that your life is perversely corrupt unless it is brought into submission to him, since his will should be the law that we live by. Again, you cannot see him clearly unless you acknowledge him as the source and origin of all blessings. And this would produce a longing to cling to him, and confidence in him, if only the human mind were not led astray by its own depravity from rightly seeking him.

7 *quid sit Deus*. In the medieval classroom, the initial questions that one asked about a subject were: *an sit? quid sit? qualis sit?* That is, "Does it exist?" "What is it?" (or, "What is the nature or essence of the subject?") and "What kind of thing is it?" (or, "What are the properties of the subject?") Calvin considers questions about the essence of God (*quid sit Deus?* also called "quiddity") to be speculative, or at least the manner in which theologians had often treated those questions, and he prefers to focus on God's attributes and his relationship to his creatures and the created world; cf. Muller, *PRRD* 3:206.

8 *qualis sit Deus*; seen note above.

9 Calvin's concern here is not merely about an ancient philosophical movement. The Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (c. 1407–1457) defended Epicurus's philosophy over that of the Stoics, generating a revival of Epicureanism in Europe. See Gootjes, "Calvin on Epicurus." Cf. Calvin's remarks on the Epicureans in *Comm. Sen. Clem.* 29–30.

10 The French adds *de droit naturel*, "right of nature," in addition to the right of creation. Benoit (1:57 n. 1) notes that Calvin borrows the Latin terms *addictus* and *mancipatus* ("subject" and "bound") from Roman law.

For, first of all, the devout mind does not dream up for itself any god it wishes, but only considers the one true God. Nor does it attribute to him whatever it pleases. Rather, since it is content to hold him to be just as he reveals himself, the devout mind is always extremely careful not to wander off course by going beyond his will in presumptuous overconfidence. When God is known in this way, because the devout mind understands that he governs all things, it is confident that he is its guardian and defender and thus devotes itself completely to his protection. Because it knows that he is the author of all blessings, if there is any affliction, if anything is lacking, the devout mind immediately takes refuge in his protection and awaits help from him. Because it is persuaded that God is good and merciful, the devout mind rests in him with firm confidence, and does not doubt that in his mercy he will always have a remedy at hand for all one's troubles. Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the devout mind also considers it fitting that it should reflect on his sovereignty in all things, honor his majesty, be concerned with promoting his glory, and obey his commandments. Because it sees that he is a just Judge, and that he is armed with severity for the punishment of wrongs, the devout mind always takes God's courtroom into consideration, and in fear of him it holds itself back and restrains itself from provoking his wrath. Yet such a mind is not so terrified by the consciousness of his judgment that it wants to evade it, even if there were any way of escape. But the devout mind cherishes him no less as the punisher of the wicked than as the benefactor of the godly. This is because the devout mind knows¹¹ that it is just as pertinent to his glory that he has punishment in store for the ungodly and the wicked as it is that he rewards the righteous with eternal life. In addition, the mind of the devout person restrains itself from sin, not merely from a dread of vengeance, but because it loves and reveres God as Father and honors and worships him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, the devout mind nonetheless fears nothing but offending him.

See what pure and genuine religion is: faith joined with a sincere fear of God, so that this fear also includes a willing reverence, and brings with it the kind of legitimate worship that the law prescribes. And this must be very carefully observed, because all people in general worship God, but very few actually revere him; at the same time that elaborate ostentation in ceremonies is everywhere, sincerity of heart is nevertheless rare.

¹¹ French: *veu qu'elle cognoist qu'il luy est autant convenable, entant qu'il est Dieu*; "seeing that it knows that it is just as appropriate to it [sc. the devout mind] as it is to God."

CHAPTER III

The Knowledge of God Is Naturally Instilled in Human Minds

1.

We assert that it is beyond controversy that there exists in the human mind, and in fact by natural instinct, a sense of divinity.¹ So that no one may take refuge in the excuse of ignorance, God has implanted into all persons some understanding of his divine majesty. He repeatedly imparts fresh drops of that understanding, constantly refreshing our memory of it. Thus, since all persons without exception recognize that God exists and that he is their Creator, their own testimony condemns them because they do not worship him or consecrate their lives to his will.

Certainly, if we were to look anywhere for ignorance of God, we would be most likely to find an example among very backward peoples, those quite removed from human civilization. However, as the eminent heathen^{a 2} says, there is no nation so barbarous, no people so feral, that this conviction that God exists is not rooted within them. And even those who seem to differ very little from wild animals in other aspects of their lives nevertheless always retain

^a Cicero, *Nat. D.* [1.16.43, *LCL* 268:44–45].

¹ *divinitatis sensum*. On this *sensus divinitatis*, and the related term *semen religionis*, which Calvin mentions a few lines later, see Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 23–39.

² *ut Ethnicus ille ait*. See also Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.13.30, *LCL* 141:36–37.

some seed of religion. This is how profoundly this common presumption has occupied the minds of all persons, and how tenaciously it clings to everyone's heart. Therefore, from the beginning of the world, there has been no region, no city, in fact no household that could do without religion. Thus, this is more or less a tacit confession that a sense of divinity is inscribed on every heart.

In fact, even idolatry is ample proof of this notion. For we know how unwillingly human beings would demean themselves to honor other creatures before themselves. Consequently, since people prefer to worship a piece of wood or stone rather than to be thought of as having no god, it is clear that this impression of the divine majesty in the human mind is very potent. This impression is so incapable of being eradicated that it is easier to break the mind's natural disposition. And this natural disposition is indeed broken when people, departing from their natural conceit, willingly debase themselves before the very lowest objects to venerate God.

2.

That is why it is utterly vacuous to say, as some do, that a few individuals concocted religion through their cunning and craftiness in order to keep the simple people in line through this scheme; meanwhile, these persons devised the worship of God for others, but they themselves did not believe in God in the least. I admit, of course, that there are very many things that cunning persons have contrived in religion to inspire the common people with reverence and to instill terror in them in order to keep their minds more compliant. But they never would have been able to manage this if the human mind had not already been previously endowed with this persistent conviction about God, from which the inclination toward religion sprouts, as if from a seed. And neither is it really credible that even those who deviously misled the unlearned under the pretense of religion were themselves entirely destitute of any knowledge of God. For even though there were some in the past—and today many more are

³ There were very few ancient western philosophers who denied the existence of the gods outright, but critics of the Epicureans, such as Cicero, accused the school of virtual atheism, since they considered the gods to be completely uninvolved with the world. Regarding the rise in atheism among humanist scholars in his own day, Calvin had named several figures in his *De Scandalis*, OS 2:201–202, *Con-*

surfacing—who deny that there is a God,³ whether they like it or not they are repeatedly stricken with the awareness of what they do not want to know. We read of no one who vented more arrogant and unbridled contempt for the divine than Gaius Caligula.⁴ Yet no one trembled more miserably when any indication of divine wrath came to light. Thus, against his will, he was terrified by the God whom he openly sought to despise.⁵ You can see this also happens here and there with people like him. For whoever is the boldest despiser of God also turns out to be the one who is the most alarmed by the sound of a falling leaf. What is the source of this, if not the vengeance of the divine majesty? The more they try to flee from it, the more forcefully it strikes their consciences. Indeed, they look around for every possible hiding place to conceal themselves from God's presence and once again expunge it from their minds. However, willingly or not, they are always held fast, ensnared. Although it may occasionally seem to subside for a moment, it always comes back again and mounts a new assault. Thus, if they have any relief from their anxiety of conscience, it is not much different from the sleep of drunkards or insane persons, who, even when they sleep, never enjoy peaceful rest, because they are continuously tormented by dreadful and horrific dreams. Therefore, even the ungodly serve as an example of the fact that some knowledge of God always lives on in the minds of all human beings.

3.

It will always be evident to persons of sound judgment that there is a sense of divinity etched onto the human mind that can never be expunged. Indeed, the stubbornness of the ungodly amply demonstrates that this conviction that there

cerning Scandals, trans. Fraser, 61–63 (Fraser misidentifies two of the figures Calvin names). These include the occult philosopher and skeptic Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535); French humanist Simon Villanovanus (1495–1530), who was accused of denying the immortality of the soul; his student Étienne Dolet (1508–1546) who also denied the existence of a personal deity and who was burned at the stake for heresy in Paris; the bawdy and irreverent scholar, monk, and satirist François Rabelais (c. 1483–1553), who had attacked Calvin and to whom Calvin returned the favor; Bonaventure des Périers (c.1510–1544), who had viciously satirized the Christian faith; and Antonio de Gouveia (Goveanus, c.1505–1566), a Portuguese scholar who became famous for his feud with Peter Ramus and whom another scholar had accused of atheism. J. Bohatec provides considerable background on each of these figures; see *Budé und Calvin*, 162–239.

⁴ Roman Emperor, A.D. 37–41.

⁵ See Suetonius, *Calig.* 51, *LCL* 31:492–493.

is a God is naturally innate in every person and that it is deeply implanted, as if in our very bones. Despite their furious struggling, they cannot disentangle themselves from the fear of God. While Diagoras and those like him may mock whatever people in every age have believed about religion,⁶ and while Dionysius may deride the judgment of heaven,⁷ this is a sardonic laughter, because the worm of conscience internally torments them more harshly than any branding iron. I do not say what Cicero did, that errors fade away over time and that religion grows stronger and becomes better by the day.⁸ For, as we will observe shortly,⁹ the world does everything in its power to shake itself free from all knowledge of God and to corrupt his worship in every way. I only say that when the stupid hardness in their minds, which the ungodly passionately summon up in order to scorn God, diminishes in strength, the sense of divinity, which they most ardently wish would die, still survives and repeatedly emerges. From this we can conclude that it is not a doctrine that one must first learn in school. Rather, everyone is their own teacher on this subject from the womb. It is something that nature itself never allows one to forget, despite the fact that many strain every muscle to do just that.

Moreover, if all persons, by being made this way, have been born and live for the purpose of knowing God, and yet the knowledge of God is fleeting and transient unless it advances to this level, then it is clear that all those who do not direct every thought and action of their lives to this purpose are deviating from the law of their creation.¹⁰ The philosophers were also aware of this. This was precisely what Plato meant when he very frequently taught that the soul's highest good is likeness to God, in which the soul, when it has obtained the knowledge of God, is completely transformed into him.^a In the

a Plato, *Phaedo* [107c–d, LCL 36:486–487]; *Theaet.* [176b, LCL 123:128–129].

6 Diagoras of Melos, known as “the atheist,” was a Greek poet of the late fifth century B.C. Cicero mentions him several times in *De Natura Deorum* as a representative of atheism: *Nat. D.* 1.1.2, 1.23.63, 1.42.117, 3.37.89; LCL 268:4–5, 60–61, 112–113, 374–375.

7 Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse (c. 432–367 B.C.), was openly contemptuous of the gods of Greece, according to Cicero, *Nat. D.* 3.34.83–84, LCL 268:368–371.

8 Cicero, *Nat. D.* 2.2.5, LCL 268:126–127.

9 See below, 1.4.1.

10 French: *s'égarent de la fin pour laquelle ils sont créés*; “they stray from the end for which they were created.”

same way, the conclusion of Gryllus, recounted in Plutarch, is also most insightful when he affirms that once religion is absent from people's lives, they are not only no better than brute beasts, but in many respects they are far more miserable, since they are susceptible to so many forms of evil, and always lead a tumultuous and restless existence.¹¹ Thus it is only the worship of God that makes human beings superior, and it is the sole means by which they aspire to immortality.

11 Plutarch, *Mor.* 12, *Bruta animalia ratione uti* (*Beasts are Rational*), 985D–992E, LCL 406:492–533.

CHAPTER IV

This Knowledge Extinguished or Corrupted, Partly by Ignorance, Partly by Wickedness

1.

However, at the same time that experience attests that the seed of religion has been divinely planted into every person,¹ one can hardly find one in a hundred who cherishes what has been conceived in one's heart. And no one at all can be found in whom that seed ripens to maturity, let alone does it bear fruit in due season. Further, whether some become futile in their superstitions, or others intentionally and wickedly desert God, still all fall away from the true knowledge of him. Consequently, no genuine piety remains in the world. But when I said that some fall into superstition through error, I did not mean that their naïveté should absolve them from guilt, because the blindness with which they operate is nearly always tangled up with prideful vanity and stubbornness. One certainly detects vanity combined with pride when miserable persons, in seeking God, do not rise to a level higher than themselves, as they ought to do. Instead, they judge him by the criterion of their carnal stupidity and, neglecting sound investigation, they fly over into pointless speculations with undue curiosity. Thus, they do not perceive him as he presents himself,

¹ The French adds: *par inspiration secrète de Dieu*; "by the secret inspiration of God."

but imagine him to be as they have fabricated him by their own arrogance. Once this gulf is open, no matter in what direction they move their feet they of necessity always rush headlong into destruction. Whatever they subsequently attempt in the worship or service of God cannot be said to be devoted to him, because they worship not God, but rather an invention and a dream of their own heart in place of him. Paul explicitly mentions this depravity, when he says that although they longed to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:22). He had just previously said that they became futile in their thinking. But so that no one may exempt them from blame, he adds that they are deservedly blinded because they are not content to live with sobriety. On the contrary, by demanding more for themselves than is right, they willfully summon darkness down on themselves and make fools of themselves with vacuous and perverse pride. It follows from this that their foolishness is inexcusable, the cause of which is not only vain curiosity, but also a lust to know more than is fitting, along with mistaken confidence.

2.

However, what David says, that the ungodly and insane suppose in their hearts that there is no God (Ps. 14:1), is first of all restricted to those who willfully render themselves senseless by extinguishing the light of nature, as we will see again shortly. We see so many who, after they have become hardened by the boldness and habit of sin, frantically fend off every memory of God; nonetheless, their natural instinct within spontaneously brings it up to them. To depict their rage as even more detestable, David represents them as people who flatly deny that God exists. Although they do not deprive him of his being, because they rob him of his judgment and providence,² they confine him, superfluous, in heaven. Now, nothing would be less fitting for God than to abandon the government of the world, leave it to chance, and turn a blind eye to the evil deeds of human beings, so that they could indulge themselves with impunity. Therefore, whoever indulges themselves without a care, extinguishing all fear of heavenly judgment, denies that there is a God. And this is the righteous vengeance of

² French: *d'office de iuge et gouverneur*; "the office of judge and governor."

God, that fat cover the hearts of the ungodly, so that after they have shut their eyes, seeing, they do not see. David is the best interpreter of his meaning when he says elsewhere that the ungodly have no fear of God before their eyes (Ps. 36:1), and again, that they proudly applaud themselves in their wrongdoing, because they convince themselves that God does not see (Ps. 10:11).

Therefore, although they are compelled to acknowledge some God, they nonetheless rob him of his glory by taking away his power. For, as Paul testifies, just as God cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13), because he perpetually remains like himself, so one may truly say that those who fabricate a dead and worthless idol deny God. It must also be observed that, although they fight against their own instinct, and desire not only to expel him from there but also to destroy him in heaven, still their stupor never grows so strong that it could prevent God from summoning them back to his courtroom now and then. But since no fear restrains them from violently assailing God, as long as they are so carried away with blind fury, it is certain that a savage forgetfulness of God reigns within them.

3.

This is how that hollow defense that many typically use as an excuse for their superstition is refuted. For they think that any eagerness for religion whatsoever, no matter how preposterous, is enough. But they do not take into consideration that true religion should conform to God's bidding as a perpetual rule; that God always remains like himself; he is no specter or phantasm that can be transformed according to the whim of every individual. And it is plain to see how superstition mocks God with deceptive hoaxes while it attempts to please him. For while it fixates almost exclusively on those things that God attests that he cares nothing about, superstition either holds in contempt, or openly repudiates, what God prescribes and what he declares pleases him. Consequently, all who introduce their own fabrications into the worship of God worship and venerate their own delusions. This is because they would never have dared to play games with God in this way unless they had first contrived a God who conformed to their inappropriate games. Therefore, the Apostle declares that vague and erroneous opinion about the divine to be ignorance of

God. When you did not know God, he says, you served those who by nature were not gods (Gal. 4:8). And in another passage, he relates that the Ephesians had been without God during the time when they were straying from a correct knowledge of the one God (Eph. 2:12). Nor does it matter very much, at least in this case, whether you imagine one god or many, since, either way, you are forsaking and abandoning the true God. Once you have left him behind, you have nothing remaining but an accursed idol. Therefore, the only remaining option is to conclude with Lactantius that no religion is legitimate unless it is joined with truth.³

4.

A second sin comes into play, namely, that they do not ever entertain a thought about God except against their will, nor do they approach him until they are dragged to him in spite of their resistance. And even then, they are not steeped in a deliberate fear that flows from a reverence for the divine majesty, but only a servile and coerced fear that God's judgment wrings out of them. Because they cannot escape it, they dread it, yet in such a way that they also hate it. Accordingly, the well-known saying of Statius, that fear first made gods in the world, suitably squares with impiety, and only in that respect.⁴ Those who harbor an inclination alien to the righteousness of God intensely desire the overturning of that courtroom, which they know is established for the punishment of their transgressions. With this disposition, they wage war against the Lord, who cannot be without judgment. But as long as they understand that his inescapable power threatens them, they tremble with fear because they can neither get rid of it nor flee from it. And so, in order to appear like they do not totally despise the one whose majesty weighs on them, they perform some sort of religion or another. In the meantime, however, they do not cease to defile themselves with vices of every kind, and to multiply their shameful acts, until they have

³ While this does not appear to be a direct quotation, it is a central theme of Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* that the Christian faith reveals a truth that cannot be found in philosophy or other religions; see, e.g., *Div. inst.* 1, praef., MPL 6:111–113, ANF 7:9.

⁴ Statius, *Thebaid*, 3.661, LCL 207:198–199. Publius Papinius Statius (c. 45–c. 96 A.D.) was a Roman poet.

violated God's holy law in every respect and destroyed all of its righteousness. Or at least that counterfeit fear of God does not so restrain them from cheerfully giving in to their sins, flattering themselves, and preferring to indulge their carnal extravagance rather than restraining it by the bridle of the Holy Spirit.⁵

But this is a hollow and deceptive shadow of religion—in fact, it hardly deserves to be called a shadow. Thus, it is easy, in turn, to draw from this how much this confused knowledge of God differs from the piety that is instilled into the hearts of the faithful alone, and from which religion ultimately arises. And yet hypocrites want to follow circuitous routes to appear like they are drawing close to the God whom they are fleeing. For where there should have been a continuous course of obedience throughout their lives, while they rebel against him without a care in nearly all their actions, they are eager to placate him with only a few paltry sacrifices. Where they should have served him through holiness of life and integrity of heart, they make up pointless nonsense and worthless little observances to try and win him over. Or rather, with even greater license they lounge lethargically in their filth, because they are confident that they can discharge their duty to him with their theatrics of expiation. Next, where their trust should have been fixed in him, they rest in themselves or other creatures, neglecting him. Finally, they embroil themselves in such a great mass of errors that a dark cloud of malice smothers and ultimately extinguishes those sparks that glimmered to make them discern God's glory. Nevertheless, that seed remains that can by no means be eradicated: the sense that there is something divine. But this seed is so corrupted that, of itself, it produces only the worst fruits.

In fact, from this one deduces with more certainty what I am now arguing, that there is a sense of the deity that is naturally inscribed on human hearts. For necessity wrings the confession of it even out of the reprobate themselves. In peaceful moments, they wittily mock God, or rather they are sarcastic and engaged in foolish chatter to make light of his power. If any hopelessness weighs down on them, it incites them to seek the same God and prompts hasty prayers. From this it may be apparent that they have not been completely ignorant of God but have stubbornly suppressed what should have emerged earlier.

⁵ On Calvin's frequent use of the bridle and related images, see Blacketer, *The School of God*, 57–77.

CHAPTER V

The Knowledge of God Shines in the Formation and Continual Government of the World

1.

In addition, the ultimate goal of a blessed life consists in the knowledge of God (John 17[:3]). Therefore, so that access to happiness may not be blocked for anyone, God has not only planted in the human mind that seed of religion that we have mentioned, but has also disclosed himself in the entire workmanship of the world and openly presents himself every day. As a result, people cannot open their eyes without being forced to see him. His essence, admittedly, is incomprehensible, so that his divinity far eludes all human senses. But he has imprinted on each of his works unambiguous marks of his glory. And indeed, they are so clear and conspicuous that no one can plead ignorance, no matter how unlearned and senseless. Therefore, the prophet most justly cries out that God is clothed with light like a garment (Ps. 104:2[–4]). It is as if to say that God began to appear publicly in visible attire only when he displayed his regalia at the creation of the world. Still today, whenever we turn our eyes here or there, he appears beautiful in this regalia. In the same place, the same prophet also ingeniously compares the stretched-out heavens to God's royal tent. He says that God has framed the beams of his upper chambers on the waters; the clouds are his vehicles; he rides on the wings of the winds; the winds and the lightning bolts

are his swift messengers. And because the glory of his power and wisdom shines more brightly up above, the sky is often called his palace. And what is more, in the first place, wherever you turn your eyes, there is not a part of the world in which you cannot perceive at least some conspicuous sparks of his glory. But you cannot scan with a single glance how far this most vast and beautiful system¹ of creation extends, without being completely overwhelmed from every direction with the infinite power of his splendor. That is why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly calls the universe the manifestation of invisible things (Heb. 11:3). For the very harmonious arrangement of the world is like a mirror for us in which we may contemplate the otherwise invisible God. For this reason, the prophet attributes a language to the celestial bodies that is known to all nations (Ps. 19:1[–4]). For in them a testimony of divinity stands out that is so evident that it should not escape the notice of even the dullest tribe. The Apostle more clearly explains this when he says that what is worthwhile to know about God has been disclosed to human beings. For everyone without exception can perceive his invisible qualities, which have been understood since the creation of the world, even his eternal power and divinity (Rom. 1:19[–20]).

2.

Both heaven and earth contain countless proofs that demonstrate God's marvelous wisdom. These include not only those more esoteric matters that astronomy,² medicine, and all the natural sciences are intended to examine more closely, but also those matters that intrude into the view of the most uneducated and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being forced to witness them. Certainly, those who have drunk from, or even had a taste of, the liberal arts advance with their assistance much further in the examination of the secrets of divine wisdom. However, ignorance of these sub-

1 Latin *machina*; cf. the French: *ce bastiment tant artificiel du monde*; "this composition of the world, so craftsmanlike."

2 *astrologia*, a term that in the sixteenth century comprised the observational study of the heavenly bodies as well as speculation about the effects that the movement of those bodies might have in human affairs (judiciary astrology). Calvin was strongly opposed to the latter (see below, 1.16.3) and in 1549 he wrote a treatise against the practice: *Advertissement contre l'astrologie qu'on appelle judiciaire* etc., CO 7:513–42; "A Warning against Judiciary Astrology and other Prevalent Curiosities," trans. Potter.

jects prevents no one from perceiving more than enough of the craftsmanship in the works of God, from which gushes forth admiration for the Craftsman. To be sure, investigations of the movements of the stars, the classification of their positions, the measurement of their distances, and the observation of their properties require skill and quite exacting effort. In the observation of these things, the providence of God displays itself more explicitly, and in the same way, it is appropriate for the mind to seek to rise somewhat higher in order to contemplate his glory. But common and even completely uneducated people, who are taught only with the aid of their eyes, cannot be ignorant of the excellence of the divine craftsmanship, which spontaneously reveals itself in that inestimable, yet so distinct and organized variety of the heavenly host. It is certain, therefore, that there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly disclose his wisdom. In the same way, it takes outstanding acumen to consider with as much skill as Galen^a employed the systemic unity, symmetry, beauty, and function within the structure of the human body. Nevertheless, by everyone's acknowledgement, the human body shows itself to be such an ingenious composition that its Maker is thus rightly regarded as admirable.

3.

And, in the same way, some of the philosophers of long ago have rightly referred to the human being as a microcosm (μικρόκοσμος),³ because a human being is a rare example of the power, goodness, and wisdom of God, and contains enough wonders to occupy our minds, if we are willing to observe them. For this reason, Paul, immediately after he has remarked that even the blind can find God by feeling around for him, adds that he is not to be sought far off (Acts 17:27). This is because all individuals undoubtedly sense within

a Galen, *De usu partium* (Περὶ χρῆσας μορίων). Galen was a second-century A.D. Greek physician and philosopher].

3 The conception of the human being as a miniature universe (microcosm) that reflects the larger universe (macrocosm) has pre-Socratic roots; the philosopher Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BC) may have been the first to describe the human being as a small world (DK 68b34). Plato employed the concept and Neoplatonism developed it. It became a commonplace in Christian thought, though not without controversy. See Kurdzialek, "Mediaeval Doctrines on Man as Image of the World."

themselves a heavenly grace that invigorates them. But if it is not necessary for us to go beyond ourselves to apprehend God, what excuse will there be for the laziness of those who are reluctant to descend within themselves in order to find God? For the same reason, immediately after he has briefly celebrated the wondrous name and glory of God that radiate everywhere, David also exclaims: What are human beings that you remember them (Ps. 8:4)? And also: Out of the mouths of children and infants you have established strength. Indeed, he not only declares that is there a clear mirror of the works of God in the human race, but also that even infants have tongues eloquent enough to proclaim his glory while they nurse at their mothers' breast, so that there is no need at all for other orators. In addition, this is why he does not hesitate to advance their voices to the front lines, as if they were well-equipped to repel the utter foolishness of those who, by virtue of their diabolical pride, seek to extinguish the name of God.⁴ From this also arises Paul's well-known quotation of Aratus,⁵ that we are the offspring of God (Acts 17:28), because, by adorning us with such excellence, he has attested that he is a father to us. In the same way, the heathen poets, out of a common sense⁶ and the dictation of experience, so to speak, also called him the father of humanity.⁷ And truly, no one will spontaneously and freely devote oneself to the service of God unless, having tasted of his fatherly love, one is lured to love and worship him in return.

4.

But here the vile ingratitude of human beings is exposed. They contain within themselves a remarkable workshop for countless works of God as well as a warehouse fully stocked with an inestimable abundance of resources. Because of this

4 Calvin is using a military metaphor rather than an image drawn from academic disputation; cf. the French: *Et voilà pourquoi il ne doute point de produire les bouches d'iceux à un combat, comme étant assez bien armées et munies pour rebouter la rage de ceux qui voudroient bien effacer le nom de Dieu par un orgueil diabolique*; "And that is why he does not hesitate to present the mouths of these [infants] in a battle, as being sufficiently well armed and equipped to repel the rage of those who would like to obliterate the name of God through a diabolical pride."

5 Aratus, *Phaen.* line 5, LCL 129:206–207.

6 *sensus communis*; on this concept, see Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense*. And see below, 1.15.6, n. 18.

7 See Cicero, *Nat. D.*, 2.2.4, LCL 268:124–125.

they should break out in praise, but instead they are inflated and swollen with all the more arrogance. They sense how God works within them in wonderful ways, and they are also taught—through their very use—what a variety of gifts they possess from his generosity. Whether they want to or not, they are compelled to know that these are indications of his divinity; yet they suppress this knowledge within themselves. In fact, they have no need to go beyond themselves, as long as they do not bury in the ground that which lights the way for their minds to clearly see God, by arrogating to themselves what is given from heaven.

Even today the earth sustains many monstrous spirits who do not hesitate to use the entire seed of divinity sown in human nature to bury the name of God. How detestable, I ask you, is this insanity, that a person who encounters God a hundred times in one's body and soul uses this very excellence as an excuse to deny that there is a God? They would not say that they are different from brute beasts by chance. Rather, they shut God out by appropriating "nature" as a cover, which for them is the artisan of all things. They observe such exquisite workmanship in the individual parts of their body, from their mouth and eyes down to their toenails. Here they also substitute nature for God. But such nimble motions of the mind, such excellent faculties, such rare gifts: these especially exhibit divinity, which does not allow itself to be easily hidden—unless the Epicureans, like the Cyclopes, quite recklessly wage war on God from this height.⁸ Is it really true that all the treasures of heavenly wisdom collaborate to govern a five-foot-long worm? And will the whole world lack this privilege? In the first place, to establish that there is something organic in the soul⁹ that corresponds to each individual part of the body so fails to obscure God's glory that, instead, it illuminates that glory. Let Epicurus answer this question: What combination of atoms digests food and drink, distributes part

8 In Greek mythology, the Cyclopes were a race of one-eyed giants, who aided the Olympian deities in their battle against the older Titan gods. In the French version, Calvin's intentional practice is to explain or simplify classical references, which would possibly be more obscure to his non-scholarly French readers; see Muller, *TUC*, 82, and note Calvin's statement in the French "*Argument du present livre*," that he first wrote the *Institutes* "in Latin, for the use of all learned persons," and later translated it for his French readers. Here, in place of the Cyclopes, Calvin substitutes "*comme des géans ou hommes sauvages*;" "like giants or wild men."

9 *aliquid organicum in anima*. French: *De dire selon Aristote, comme ils font, que l'âme est douée d'organes ou instrumens*; "To say, as they do, following Aristotle, that the soul is endowed with organs or instruments"

into excrement and part into blood, and causes the individual parts of the body to perform their functions with so much diligence that it seems as if so many souls governed one body by common consent?

5.

But my present concern is not with that sty of swine.¹⁰ Rather, I am addressing those who, since they are devoted to convoluted sophistry, would willingly introduce, in an indirect way, that pointless statement of Aristotle to both destroy the immortality of the soul and to deprive God of his rights.¹¹ For, because the faculties of the soul are organic,¹² with this pretext they bind the soul to the body in such a way that the soul cannot exist without it; and by their elegies of nature they even suppress the name of God with all their might. However, the powers of the soul are far from being limited to functions that serve the body. What does it have to do with the body when you measure the heavens, compute the number of the stars, understand the size of each one, and when you know how distant they are from each other, how quickly or slowly they complete their circuits, and how many degrees they decline in one direction or another? I admit that astronomy does, in fact, have some usefulness.¹³ But I am only pointing out that, in this highly advanced research into celestial matters, there is no organic symmetry; the soul, by contrast, has functions that are separate from the body.¹⁴ I have provided one example, and from this,

¹⁰ Calvin here refers to the Epicureans, whom patristic writers such as Jerome, Augustine, and Isidore of Seville frequently referred to as swine. They drew this image from Horace's ironic description of himself as "a hog from Epicurus' herd," *Ep.* 1.4.16, *LCL* 194:276–277. See Marchesi, "Epicuri de grege porcus."

¹¹ *OS* 3:48 n. 3 refers to Aristotle, *De An.* 2.1, 412a 28–412b 6, *LCL* 288:68–69, where Aristotle identifies the soul as the form of the body, which potentially has life, and as the actuality of life in the body. But more specifically relevant is *De An.* 2.2, 414a 20–23, *LCL* 288:78–79, in which Aristotle denies that the soul can exist apart from the body, and thereby effectively denies the immortality of the soul.

¹² French: *Car sous ombre que les vertus de l'âme sont instrumentales, pour s'appliquer d'un accord avec les parties extérieures*; "For, under the pretext that the powers of the soul are instrumental, to conform itself harmoniously with the external parts"

¹³ French: *Je confesse que l'astrologie est utile et sert à ceste vie caduque, et que par ce moyen quelque fruit et usage de ceste estude de l'âme revient au corps*; "I confess that astrology is useful and serves this frail life, and that by this means some fruit and use of this study of the soul benefits the body."

¹⁴ French: *que l'âme a ses vertus à part, que ne sont point liées à telle mesure qu'on les puisse appeler organiques ou instrumentales au regard du corps, comme on acouple deux bœufs ou deux chevaux à*

readers will easily come up with the rest. The agility of the soul is certainly multifaceted. With this agility it surveys heaven and earth, joins the past and the future, retains the memory of things heard in the past, and even more than that, it forms mental images for itself of whatever it wants. Also multifaceted is the ingenuity by which the soul invents incredible things, and which is the mother of so many wonderful arts. These are the unmistakable signs of divinity in humanity.¹⁵ Why is it that, while sleeping, the soul not only spins and turns,¹⁶ but also comes up with many useful ideas, engages in numerous deliberations, and even foresees the future? What must we say here, except that the indications of immortality that have been impressed onto human beings cannot be erased? Now, what reason will there be to propose that humans are divine and yet not acknowledge the Creator? Will we¹⁷ really discern right from wrong with the judgment bestowed on us, although there is no judge in heaven? Will we continue to retain some remnants of intelligence, even in our sleep, while there is no God keeping watch in governing the world? Will we consider ourselves the inventors of so many arts and useful subjects, so that God is defrauded of his praise? And this, despite the fact that experience teaches us well enough that what we receive is dispensed to us, in unequal measures, from elsewhere?

But a secret inspiration that imparts life to the entire world, which some babble about, is not only pathetic, but also utterly profane. They are fond of this celebrated passage from Virgil:

First, then, the sky and lands and sheets of water,
The bright moon's globe, the Titan sun and stars,
Are fed within by Spirit, and a Mind
Infused through all the members of the world
Makes one great living body of the mass.

trainer une charrue; "that the soul has its distinct powers, which are not linked to the extent that they can be called organic or instrumental with respect to the body, in the way that one couples two oxen or two horses to pull a plow."

¹⁵ Cf. Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.24–27, *LCL* 141:64–79, where Cicero presents a detailed argument to demonstrate that "there are divine elements in human souls."

¹⁶ *se circumagit et versat*. Calvin may be referring to how the soul makes the body toss and turn during sleep, or how the mind turns things over and reflects on things during sleep, or both.

¹⁷ The French adds: *nous qui ne sommes que fange et ordure*; "we who are nothing but mud and filth."

From Spirit come the races of man and beast,
 The life of birds, odd creatures the deep sea
 Contains beneath her sparkling surfaces,
 And fiery energy from a heavenly source, etc.^c

As if the world, which was created to be a theater of God's glory,¹⁸ were its own creator! For this is what the same poet writes in another place, echoing the sentiment common among Greek and Latin writers:

... bees own a share of the divine soul and drink in
 the ether of space; for, god invests everything—
 earth and the tracts of the sea and deepest heaven;
 from him, flocks, herds, men, all species of wild animals—
 each one gains for itself at birth its little life;
 doubtless, afterward, all return to him and, released, are
 made new; death has no place but, alive, they fly up, each
 to be counted as a star and ascend into heaven above.^d

This empty speculation about a universal mind that animates and invigorates the world—look how effective it is at producing and nurturing devotion in human hearts! This is even more apparent in the sacrilegious assertions of that filthy dog Lucretius, which have been deduced from the same principle.¹⁹ This is really the creation of a shadowy deity, in order to push far away the true God, whom we should fear and worship. Admittedly, I acknowledge that “nature is God” can be a devout statement, but only when it comes from a devout mind. But it is an ineloquent and improper way of speaking, because nature is more correctly an order appointed by God. Therefore, in such important matters that deserve extraordinary reverence, it is harmful to conflate God ambiguously with the inferior course of his works.

^c Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6 [724–730; trans. here by Fitzgerald, 185; cf. *LCL* 63:582–583].

^d Virgil, *Georgics* 4 [220–227; trans. here by Lembke, 67; cf. *LCL* 63:234–235].

¹⁸ *spectaculum gloriae Dei*. The term *spectaculum* refers to a spectator's seat in a theater, or a performance in a theater. Calvin frequently depicts the created world as a theater in which God's glory is on display. On this theme in Calvin, see Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*.

¹⁹ See Lucretius, *De rerum nat.* 1.54–61, *LCL* 181:6–7.

6.

Therefore, let us remember, whenever each of us reflects on our own nature, that there is one God who governs all natures in such a way that he wants us to look to him, to direct our faith to him, to worship and call upon him. For nothing is more preposterous than to enjoy such outstanding gifts that give expression to the divine within us, and then neglect the author who generously gives these gifts to us in answer to our prayers. What outstanding examples his power already uses to captivate us, so that we are attentive to him! Unless, perhaps, it is possible for us to overlook whose power it is that by his Word sustains this infinite mass of heaven and earth. At times, with a mere nod, he shakes the sky with roaring peals of thunder, consumes everything with thunderbolts, and ignites the atmosphere with lightning. At other times, he disrupts it with various kinds of storms, and then immediately, when he pleases, he makes the same sky calm in an instant. He holds back the sea as if suspended in the air, which seems to threaten the earth with continual devastation due to its depth. And at one moment, he provokes the sea in a terrifying manner, with a violent turbulence of winds; at another, he renders it placid by calming the waves. Related to this are the tributes to God's power, testified to by nature, which occur frequently but especially in the book of Job and in Isaiah. For the moment, I intentionally pass over these, because they will find a more suitable place elsewhere, when I discuss from the Scriptures the creation of the world.²⁰ For now, I only want to touch on the fact that this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and to those within his household,²¹ if they trace the lines that sketch a living portrait of him above and below. Now, this very power leads us to reflect on his eternity, because it is necessary for the one from whom all things derive their origin to be eternal and to have his beginning from himself.²² Furthermore, if we look for the cause that once prompted him to create all these things, and now moves him to conserve his creation, we will

²⁰ See below, 1.14.1–2, 20–22.

²¹ Cf. the French: *commune aux payens et aux domestiques de l'Eglise*; “common to the pagans and to the family members of the church.”

²² *a seipso*, a reference to the doctrine of divine aseity; see Muller, *DLGTT*, s.v. *aseitas*.

find that the cause is solely his goodness. And furthermore, even if this is the only cause, it should still be more than enough to draw us into his love, since, as the prophet reminds us, there is no creature on which he has not poured out his mercy (Ps. 145:9).

7.

In the second category of his works, namely, those that occur outside the ordinary course of nature, evidences of his qualities also present themselves just as clearly. For he regulates his providence in the supervision of human society such that, while in countless ways he is kind and generous toward all, he nonetheless declares, by conspicuous daily indications, his lenience toward the devout and his severity toward the wicked and evildoers. For there are no doubts about the kind of retribution he exacts for shameful deeds. At the same time, he proves himself to be the protector and avenger of innocence when he causes the life of good persons to prosper by his blessing, relieves their need, alleviates and comforts their sorrows, mitigates their adversities, and provides for their wellbeing in every respect. And yet it should not obscure his perpetual rule of justice that he fairly often permits the wicked and guilty to revel for a time without being punished, but allows good persons and the innocent to be tormented by numerous adversities and even to endure oppression through the malice and wickedness of the ungodly. Rather, a very different thought should come to mind. Seeing that he punishes one shameful act in an obvious manifestation of his wrath, it is a sign²³ that he hates all such acts. Seeing that he allows many shameful acts to go unpunished, it is a sign that there will be another judgment, to which their punishment is deferred. In a similar way, what ample grounds he supplies us for considering his mercy, when, quite often, he nonetheless pursues miserable sinners with his untiring kindness, until he subdues their depravity by doing good to them, calling them back to himself with more-than-fatherly leniency.

²³ Supplied from the French, "*c'est signe*," also in the following sentence.

8.

To this end, the prophet recalls that, in desperate situations, God suddenly, miraculously, and contrary to expectations, comes to the rescue of those who are miserable and almost lost. Or he protects those who are wandering through the wilderness from predators, and eventually directs them back on course. Or he supplies the needy and hungry with food. Or he delivers captives from foul pits and iron chains. Or he brings the shipwrecked into port unharmed. Or he cures those who are half dead from diseases. Or he scorches the land with heat and drought or makes it fertile with the secret irrigation of his grace. Or he elevates the most scorned from the masses or deposes nobles from their high position of dignity (Ps. 107). From these examples that he provides, the prophet concludes that what are considered random occurrences are so many attestations of God's heavenly providence, yet especially of his fatherly mercy. And therefore, the devout are given grounds to rejoice, while the mouths of the ungodly and reprobate are silenced. But the majority of people, steeped as they are in their errors, are blind in such a luminous theater.²⁴ Because of this, the prophet exclaims that it is an instance of rare and exceptional wisdom to prudently appraise these works of God. Some persons—who appear to be very perceptive in other respects—do not profit at all when they observe these works. And certainly, no matter how much the glory of God shines, hardly one person in a hundred is a genuine spectator of it.

No more so are his power and wisdom hidden in the shadows. His power clearly appears when the savagery of the ungodly, which all consider insurmountable, is subdued in an instant; when their arrogance is tamed, their strongest fortresses are demolished and their weapons and armor shattered to pieces; when their strength is diminished, their schemes are thwarted and they fail under their own weight. It appears when their audacity, which exalted itself above the heavens, is thrown all the way down to the center of the earth; when, on the contrary, the lowly are lifted up out of the dust, and the needy are raised up out of the excrement (Ps. 113:7). It appears when the oppressed

²⁴ On Calvin's theme of creation as the theater of God's glory, see above, n. 18.

and afflicted are rescued from extreme difficulties and those who mourn are restored to good hope; when the unarmed achieve victory over those who are armed, the few over the many, and the weak over the strong.²⁵ Moreover, God's wisdom is conspicuously excellent when it manages all things at the most opportune time, confounds all the world's insight, and traps the cunning in their own craftiness (I Cor. 3:19; Job 5[:13]). In sum, there is nothing that his wisdom does not manage according to the best method.

9.

We see that it does not take long or strenuous demonstration to come up with evidence that serves to illustrate and affirm the divine majesty. For, it is clear from the few we have briefly touched upon that, wherever you happen to go, they are apparent and obvious enough to be easily recognized by the eyes and pointed out by the finger. And here we must again observe that we are summoned to a knowledge of God. This is not the kind of knowledge that, content with useless speculation, merely flies around in the brain, but the kind that will be solid and productive, if we rightly understand it and it takes root in the heart. For the Lord reveals himself by his powers. We sense their force within us and enjoy their benefits. As a result, this knowledge necessarily affects us much more deeply than if we imagined a God who could not at all reach our senses. As a result, we understand that this is the most correct way and the most appropriate procedure for seeking God. It is not for us to attempt, with presumptuous curiosity, to go so far as to examine his essence, which is to be adored rather than investigated in too much detail. But we should contemplate him in his works, through which he renders himself near and familiar to us and communicates himself to us in a certain way. The Apostle referred to this when he said that God is not to be sought far off, since he dwells in every one of us by his eminently present power (Acts 17:27). Therefore, David first confesses God's indescribable greatness and then, when he proceeds to a commemoration

²⁵ The French adds: *ie vous prie ne devons-nous point là considérer une puissance autre qu'humaine, et qui sort du ciel pour estre cogneue icy bas?* "I ask you, should we not here consider a power other than human, and which comes out of heaven to be known here below?"

of his works, he declares that he will describe²⁶ that greatness (Ps. 145[:4–6]). For this reason, it is also right for us to apply ourselves to this investigation of God. It holds our intellect suspended in wonder in such a way that at the same time it affects us deeply with powerful feeling. And, as Augustine teaches in another passage, because we are incapable of comprehending him, fainting, so to speak, under his greatness, we should observe his works that we may be restored by his goodness.^e

10.

Further, this kind of knowledge should not only rouse us to the worship of God, but also awaken and uplift us to the hope of the future life. For, since we discern that the examples the Lord provides both of his clemency and of his severity are merely preliminary and incomplete, we should no doubt consider that he thereby provides a prelude to greater things, whose full manifestation and display are postponed to another life. Conversely, when we see the ungodly burden the devout with afflictions, intimidate them with injuries, oppress them with false accusations, and wound them with insults and abuse, while, in contrast, the wicked flourish, prosper, and obtain peace with dignity—and do so with impunity—we should immediately conclude that there will be another life. To this other life are reserved both punishment for injustice and reward for righteousness. In addition, when we see that the faithful are quite frequently chastised by the Lord's rods, we may conclude with the utmost certainty that the ungodly will not at all escape his lashes in the future. For what Augustine says is insightful: "If every sin were now stricken with obvious punishment, one might think that nothing is left for the final judgment. Conversely, if God did not now punish any sin, one might believe that there is no divine providence at all."^f

Thus, we must admit that in the individual works of God, but especially in those works as a whole, God's perfections²⁷ are depicted as if in paintings. These

^e Augustine, *En. Ps.*, 144[:6, MPL 37:1872].

^f Augustine, *Civ. Dei*, 1.8[:2, MPL 41:20, NPNF1 2:5, FC 8:29].

²⁶ Calvin here contrasts God's indescribable (*inenarrabilis*) greatness with the fact that David nonetheless declares that he will describe it (*enarro*).

²⁷ Or powers or virtues, *virtutes*.

perfections invite and entice the entire human race to the knowledge of God, and from that knowledge to true and complete happiness. Furthermore, his powers are most brilliantly evident in his works. Nevertheless, we understand their primary purpose, how they are effective, and why we ought to reflect on them, only when we descend into ourselves, and consider the ways in which the Lord displays his life, wisdom, and power in us and exercises his righteousness, goodness, and mercy toward us. For although David justly complains that unbelievers lack understanding, because they do not consider God's profound purposes in the government of the human race (Ps. 92:6), still, what he says elsewhere is very true, that the wondrous wisdom of God in this respect is more abundant than the hairs of our head (Ps. 40:12²⁸). But, since I will discuss this argument at greater length later in its proper place, I omit it for now.

11.

Although the Lord displays both himself and his everlasting kingdom in the mirror of his works with great clarity, still, our dullness is such that we become increasingly numb to such obvious testimonies that they pass by with no effect. For, with respect to the construction and most beautiful arrangement of the world, how few of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to the sky, or look around at various regions of the earth, turn our minds back to remember the Creator? Do we not, instead, sit around gazing at his works while ignoring their Author? And regarding those events that daily occur beyond the ordinary course of nature, how many do not prefer to conclude that people are tossed and turned by blind, random chance, rather than governed by the providence of God? But if the guidance and direction of these things ever do drive us to the consideration of God (which inevitably happens to everyone), nevertheless, once we have haphazardly come up with a sense of some deity, we immediately slide down into the delusions or depraved fabrications of our flesh and we corrupt the pure truth of God by our vanity. We differ from each other in that each of us individually derives some particular error for ourselves, yet we are

²⁸ Calvin apparently remembered this passage incorrectly, for it refers to the psalmist's troubles and sins being more numerous than the hairs of his head (and in Ps. 69:4, the psalmist's enemies are similarly numerous). Christ uses the comparison positively in Matthew 10:30 and Luke 12:7.

utterly alike in that we all without exception forsake the one true God in favor of monstrous nonsense.²⁹ This disease infects not only common and dimwitted minds, but also the most brilliant ones and those that are otherwise endowed with exceptional acumen.

How prolifically has the entire class of philosophers betrayed their stupidity and dullness in this regard! For, leaving aside the others who speak far more absurd nonsense, Plato, the most religious and level-headed of them all, also loses himself in his round globe.³⁰ And what should happen to the others when the leading ones, who were supposed to illuminate the way for the rest, are so deluded and stumbling? In a similar way, when the governance of human affairs proves providence so clearly that it cannot be denied, people still fail to gain any more advantage from this than if they believed all things were turned upside down by the random will of fortune. This is how great our proclivity to futility and error is! I am only referring to the most exceptional people, not the common lot, whose insanity in profaning the truth of God has expanded without limit.

12.

From this comes that immense sewage of errors that filled and deluged the whole globe. For each person's mind is like a labyrinth,³¹ so that it is no wonder that the individual nations were diverted into various fictions. Not only that, but practically each individual had their own deities. For, since presumption

²⁹ French: *idolatries monstrueuses*; "monstrous idolatries."

³⁰ See Plato, *Tim.* 33B–34B, *LCL* 234:60–65, where Plato asserts that the cosmos is spherical in shape and refers to the cosmos as a blessed god (εὐδαίμονα θεόν), though Plato has a lesser sort of deity in mind. In the 1539–1545 editions, Calvin had explicitly referenced the *Timaeus*, and included this statement: "Indeed, he seeks a material God, which is utterly alien to, and unworthy of, the divine majesty." This description, however, does not accurately reflect the fact that Plato holds to a hierarchy of deities. Cf. Cicero, *Nat. D.* 1.10.23–24, *LCL* 268:26–29, where Cicero expresses his "surprise at their stupidity in holding that a being who is immortal and also blessed is of a spherical shape, merely on the ground that Plato pronounces a sphere to be the most beautiful of all figures" (*LCL* trans., 27); and Melancthon, *Loci Communes* (1543), locus 1, where he notes that Plato defines God as "the eternal mind," and argues that Plato's view of God is incomplete rather than inaccurate, *CR* 21:610; Preus trans. 610.

³¹ Calvin frequently uses the image of the labyrinth, the maze from the Greek myth of Daedalus and the Minotaur, to illustrate matters that are beyond human comprehension. See Muller, *TUC*, 79–98.

and lust are added to ignorance and darkness, hardly anyone has ever been found who did not invent some idol or phantom for themselves in the place of God. Certainly, just as streams of water bubble up from a vast and abundant spring, an immense horde of gods has flowed from the human mind, while each person, wandering about with an excessive lack of restraint, erroneously fabricates this or that about God. Yet it is not necessary here to compile a list of the superstitions that have entangled the world, since it would be endless. And so many corruptions make it sufficiently obvious, without saying a word, how dreadful the blindness of the human mind is. I leave out the simple and uneducated common people. But among the philosophers, who attempted to penetrate into heaven through reason and science, how shameful their disagreements are! The more naturally gifted each of them was, and refined by art and sciences, the more he seemed to paint his opinion with vibrant colors. But if you examine all of these colors more closely, you will discover that the dyes are fading. The Stoics thought themselves ingenious³² when they said that it was possible to elicit various names for God from all the parts of nature, yet without cutting the one God into pieces in the process.³³ As if we were not already excessively inclined to vanity without our facing an abundance of various gods to drag us even further and more violently into error! In addition, the mystic³⁴ theology of the Egyptians shows that, in this respect, all have diligently taken care to avoid the appearance of raving irrationally. And something that seemed probable at first glance might perhaps deceive the simple and unwary, but no mortal ever devised anything that did not repulsively corrupt religion.

Further, this very confused disagreement increased the audacity of the Epicureans and other crude despisers of piety,³⁵ so that they abandoned all sense of God.³⁶ For, when they saw all the wisest persons argue over their contradictory opinions, they did not hesitate to conclude from these disagreements, and even

32 The French reads, *Les Stoïques ont pensé avoir trouvé la fève au gasteau, comme on dit*; “The Stoics were thought to have found the bean in the cake, as they say.” This old French proverb indicates a fortuitous discovery.

33 See Cicero, *Nat. D.* 1.14.36–1.15.41, *LCL* 268:38–43.

34 Cf. the French: *qu’ils ont nommée secrète*; “which they called ‘secret.’”

35 Cf. the French: *et Athées prophanes contempteurs de la religion*; “and profane atheist despisers of religion.” In addition to ancient offenders, Calvin likely has modern despisers of religion in mind as well; see above, 1.3.2 and n. 3.

36 Cf. Cicero, *Nat. D.*, 1.30.85, *LCL* 268:82–83.

from each one’s trivial and absurd teaching, that it was pointless and foolish for people to torment themselves when they search for a god who certainly does not exist. And they thought they could get away with this, because it would be better to deny God outright with a brief summation than to invent doubtful gods and then provoke controversies from which there is no escape. And these people really argue with too much ignorance, or rather, they introduce a smokescreen derived from human ignorance to hide their impiety. This ignorance does not at all make it right to detract anything from God. But since all persons³⁷ admit that there is no subject on which the learned and the unlearned disagree so much at once, one can conclude from this disagreement that the minds of people who make mistakes like this in their enquiries about God are more than senseless and blind when it comes to heavenly mysteries. Others praise the response of Simonides.³⁸ When Hiero the tyrant asked him what God was, he asked to be given a day to think about it. When the tyrant asked the same question the next day, Simonides requested two more days. And after doubling the number of days a few more times, he finally replied, “The longer I reflect on the subject, the more obscure I find it.”³⁹ He was certainly wise to withhold his opinion on a subject that was obscure to him. Yet this shows that if persons are taught only by nature, they understand nothing that is certain, sound, or distinct, but are so attached to confused principles that they worship an unknown God.

13.

Now we must also understand that any who adulterate⁴⁰ pure religion—which will certainly happen to all who are devoted to their own opinion—depart from the one God. Of course, they will exclaim that they have something else in mind. But what they intend, or what they convince themselves about, matters little. For the Holy Spirit declares that all who substitute demons for God

37 The French reads, *les payans*; “the pagans.”

38 The French adds the description, *un Poète payan*; “a pagan poet.” Simonides was a Greek poet who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.

39 Cicero, *Nat. D.*, 1.22.60, *LCL* 268:58–59.

40 The French adds, *et s’en révoltent*; “and revolts against it.”

because of the darkness of their minds are apostates. For this reason, Paul declares that the Ephesians were without God until they had learned from the gospel what it meant to worship the true God (Eph. 2:12). Nor must this be restricted to only one people, since in another passage he asserts generally that all mortals have become futile in their thinking (Rom. 1:21), after the majesty of the Creator had been revealed to them in the formation of the world. And consequently, Scripture, to make room for the true and only God, condemns as lies and deceit whatever divinity was formerly worshipped among the Gentiles. Scripture does not allow for any divine presence except on Mount Zion, where the proper knowledge of God thrived⁴¹ (Hab. 2:18, 20). Certainly, among the Gentiles in the time of Christ, the Samaritans seemed to come very close to true piety;⁴² yet we hear from the mouth of Christ that they did not know what they worshipped (John 4:22). It follows from this that they were deluded by futile error.

In short, although not all were plagued with crude vices, or had fallen into blatant idolatries, still there was never a pure and approved religion that was grounded solely in common sense. For, although there were a few who were not out of their minds like the common lot, the teaching of Paul remains firmly established: The leaders of this world do not understand the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:8). But if the most outstanding people have wandered in darkness, what will we have to say about the dregs? Thus, it is no surprise if the Holy Spirit rejects as degenerate every form of worship derived from human judgment. For, although a humanly conceived opinion about heavenly mysteries does not always produce a great mass of errors, it is still the mother of error. And even if nothing worse happens, it is not a minor vice to randomly worship an unknown God. And yet, according to what Christ says, any who have not been taught from the Law⁴³ which God they must worship, are held guilty of this (John 4:22). And in fact, those who were the best legislators progressed

41 Instead of this phrase, the French reads: *pour tenir les hommes en pureté*; “to maintain people in purity.”

42 Cf. the French: *Certes du temps de nostre seigneur Iesus Christ il n’y avoit nation en terre excepté les Iuifs, qui approchast plus de la droite piété que les Samaritains*; “Certainly in the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, there was no nation on earth beside the Jews that came closer to correct piety than the Samaritans.”

43 The French reads: *par l’Ecriture Sancte*; “by Holy Scripture.”

no further than to declare that religion was founded on public consensus. And furthermore, according to Xenophon,⁴⁴ even Socrates praises the answer⁴⁵ of Apollo, in which he directed that each person should worship the gods in the manner of their ancestors and according to the custom of their own city.⁴⁶ But how do mortals get the right to determine, by their own authority, something that greatly transcends the world? Or who will be able to so assent to the consensus of their forefathers, or the ordinances of the people, that they will accept without hesitation a god that has been humanly imparted to them?⁴⁷ Each person will stand firm in their own judgment rather than subject themselves to the decision of another. Thus, since following either the custom of a city or the consent of ancient times in the worship of God is too weak and fragile a bond of piety, it remains for God himself to witness to himself from heaven.

14.

Therefore, so many lamps, lit to illustrate the glory of their Maker in the craftsmanship of the world, shine for us in vain. In spite of thus shining their rays on us from every direction, still these lamps, in themselves, can never guide us in the right way. And, of course, some sparks are kindled. But they are smothered before they can radiate fuller brilliance. For this reason, the Apostle, in the same passage where he calls the worlds the images of invisible things, adds that through faith we understand them to have been formed by the Word of God (Heb. 11:3). By this he indicates that, although the invisible divinity is displayed in such spectacles, still we do not have the eyes to perceive this divinity, unless they are enlightened by an internal revelation of God through faith. And Paul, when he teaches that what is to be known about God is disclosed from the creation of the world (Rom. 1:19), does not identify this display as something that human insight can comprehend. But instead, he shows that it can only go so far as to render people inexcusable. Although, in one passage, the same apostle states that God is not to be sought far off, since he dwells within us

44 The French adds: *Xénophon, philosophe bien estimé loue et prise. . .*; “Xenophon, a highly respected philosopher, praises and values. . .”

45 *responsum*, that is, the response of the oracle of Apollo.

46 See Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.3.16, *LCL* 168:320–321.

47 Cf. Cicero, *Nat. D.* 3.4.9, *LCL* 268:294–295; Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 2.7, *MPL* 6:285; *ANF* 7:50.

(Acts 17:27), yet in another passage Paul teaches how effective such nearness is. In former times, he says, the Lord permitted the Gentiles to go their own ways. Nonetheless, he did not leave them without a testimony of himself, doing good to them from heaven, providing rain and times of abundance, filling the people's hearts with food and joy (Acts 14:16[–17]). Therefore, even though the Lord is not left without a witness to himself, in that he gently allures people to a knowledge of himself through abundant and varied kindness, they still do not desist for that reason from following their own ways, that is, their deadly errors.

15.

But although we lack the natural capacity to be able to rise to a pure and lucid knowledge of God, nonetheless, every excuse is cut off, because the vice of sloth is within us. Nor, in fact, can we thus use ignorance as an excuse without our conscience itself continually accusing us of both laziness and ingratitude. As if this defense were worthy to be allowed: for a person to plead the excuse that they lacked the ears to hear the truth, even though the mute creatures possess voices more than resonant to communicate it! Or to plead that one cannot see with one's eyes what creatures without eyes make plain! Or to use mental weakness as an excuse, while all the irrational creatures educate them! For this reason, since all things show us the right way, we are rightly left with absolutely no excuse for going astray as vagrants and wanderers. Indeed, it must be attributed to the fault of human beings that people immediately corrupt the seed of the knowledge of God, sown in their minds by the wonderful artistry of nature, so that it never produces good and sound fruit. But despite this, it is absolutely true that we are by no means adequately instructed by the bare and simple testimony that the creatures magnificently give to the glory of God. For as soon as we have sampled a small taste of divinity by observing the world, we neglect the true God, and replace him with the dreams and phantoms of our own brains. And we transfer the praise for righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and virtue from the source itself to anything and everything. Moreover, we either obscure his daily deeds or distort them by twisted judgment, so that we prematurely snatch away both their glory from them and due praise from their Author.

