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KNOWING  
CHRISTIANITY

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH  
AND HOW THEY SHAPE DAILY LIFE

*New Edition*



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## THE MOST IMPORTANT THING OF ALL

KNOWING GOD. Is there any greater theme to study?

Is there any nobler goal to aim at? Is there any greater good to enjoy? Is there any deeper longing in the human heart than the desire to know God? Surely not. And Christianity's good news is that it can happen! That is why the Christian message is a word for the world. To know God is the biggest and best of the blessings promised in the gospel. Equally, knowing God is celebrated in the Scriptures as the supreme gift of grace. Jeremiah, looking forward to what God was going to do, spoke in these terms: "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel." And the consequence will be this: "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer 31:31, 34). The fulfillment of this promise is the glory of Christianity. Christians know God. Everyone may know God.

Jesus Christ came as a preacher of eternal life. On one occasion, in prayer to his Father, he defined eternal life. "Now this is eternal life," he said: "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). The apostle John, the beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper and perhaps saw deeper into Jesus' heart of love than anyone else, sums



up at the end of his first letter what Christ has brought to him and his fellow believers: “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true” (1 Jn 5:20). *True* here means not only truthful and trustworthy as opposed to deceitful and unreliable but also “real” as opposed to imaginary. John is telling us that Christians know—that is, are consciously and cognitively related to—the personal mind and power that is behind everything. And this knowledge is itself a personal relationship, knowledge-in-union and knowledge-in-fellowship, a precious reality of experience for which “eternal life” is the proper name. So he continues: “And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (v. 20).

Such is the glorious reality of knowing God. For this we were made, and for this we have been redeemed. This is the true object of the world’s longing and the sum and substance of the Christian’s ambition and hope. The apostle Paul states his own life goal in these terms: “I want to know Christ” (Phil 3:10). The hope to which Paul looks forward he sums up in this way: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). Paul’s ambition and his hope are focused in terms of the knowledge of God. As for him, so for us: it is our highest dignity, our proper purpose and our final fulfillment to know God. There is, I repeat, no more vital subject that any of us can ever explore than knowing God, according to the Scriptures.

### **KNOWING GOD IN CALVIN’S THEOLOGY**

In Christian theology, knowing God has always been a key concept. Two questions, of course, arise with regard to it: first, the question of content (what and how much can we know?), and second, the question of method (how and by what means does this knowledge come to us?). The rest of this book gives a partial answer to the first question; this chapter deals with the second. The best and most



masterful among Christian expositors of this theme, in my view, was John Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* provide a classic treatment of biblical teaching on the knowledge of God. Part of what happened during the five editions of his book's growth, from the little pocket book that it was in 1536 to the big folio that it became in 1559, was that the theme of knowing God, dealt with sketchily in the first edition, indeed dismissed in scarcely more than a sentence, came to dominate the whole structure.

The opening sentence of the 1536 *Institutes* was this: "The sum of sacred doctrine is contained in these two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." In the second edition that sentence was changed into this: "The sum of our wisdom is contained in our knowledge of God and of ourselves." From the second to the fourth edition, that sentence was then expanded in separate chapters: one on the knowledge of God, one on the knowledge of ourselves. In the final edition, the sum of Calvin's material was arranged in four distinct books. The first book was called *Of the Knowledge of God the Creator*; the second book was called *Of the Knowledge of Christ the Redeemer*; and the third was called *Of the Way to Come to Know the Grace of Christ*. The theme of knowing God expanded until it virtually controlled and shaped the whole work.

Calvin's teaching is, first, that the knowledge of God is more than the natural person's awareness of God. Calvin is very emphatic that all human beings are aware of God and, try as they might, cannot get rid of this awareness. Calvin calls this sense of deity the "seed of religion" that is planted in every human heart. The unredeemed person wishes to pretend that there is no God, but pretense it remains, because deep down he or she cannot help knowing that God is. Nonetheless, this awareness of God's reality is not to be equated with the knowledge of God that the Christian has, for, to Calvin, knowledge of God is always personal knowledge within a covenanted relationship, and non-Christians lack this. Only through the



agency of our Lord Jesus Christ does such a relationship become a reality. As he himself said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [that is, comes to know God as his or her heavenly Father] except through me” (Jn 14:6).

Knowledge of God as our covenant God, that is, as the Creator who has given himself to us to be our God of grace forever, is basic to Calvin’s understanding because it is basic to the Bible’s understanding of what knowing God means. “Religion,” said Luther, “is a matter of personal pronouns,” that is, it centers upon my being able to say to God, “My God”; and knowing that God says to me, “My child.” It is in and through that relationship that knowledge of God becomes the life-transforming reality that Calvin knew it to be.

Second, knowledge of God is more than any real or fancied experience of God. Calvin, like the Bible, is able to be very clear on this, for Calvin, like the Bible, is a product of an era when people were less self-absorbed than we are and were more interested in the realities we experience than in our experiences of them. It is rather difficult, I think, for us modern-day people to understand this distinction. We are very self-absorbed; the human-centeredness of our Western culture has made us so. We are interested in experiences, meaning our “feelings” or our “reactions to something,” for their own sake, as if experiences are all that matter. We are inclined to jump to the conclusion that the more intense an experience is, the more of God there must be in it. But by biblical standards, that is not so at all.

Not even what is set forth as a conversion experience may be equated with the knowledge of God, for, says Scripture, we know God by faith. Faith is an outgoing of the heart in trust. Experiences flow from it, but faith is a relationship of recognition, credence and trust and is not in itself an experience. I grant that without faith there would be no conversion experiences. But faith is something distinct from any experience. Faith is the outgoing of our heart to God and Christ, who are there inviting us to themselves, saying to



us, “Come and put your trust for eternal life in the Father and the Son.” Faith focuses not on feelings but on facts, not on reactions inside us but on realities outside us, on the words and works of the God who is there, searching us, knowing us and personally addressing us, whether we like it or not. There are imitation experiences of God and of conversion that do not spring from real faith and are not instances of knowledge of God at all. This is something we must not forget.

Third, knowledge of God, according to Calvin and the Bible, is more than knowing *about* God, although knowing about God is its foundation. There is a difference between knowledge by description, in which you simply gain information about something, and knowledge by acquaintance, in which you are in direct contact with that reality. The knowledge of God is by acquaintance, which is more than knowledge by description. When it comes to knowledge by description, Calvin is very emphatic as to what must be known about God. In the first chapter of the first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin wrote that there are four things that must be known about God. First, God is “infinite wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power and life, so that there is no other wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power and life save in him.” Second, “All things, both in heaven and earth, were created to his glory.” Third, “He is a righteous judge who sternly punishes those who swerve from his laws and do not wholly fulfill his will.” And fourth, “He is mercy and gentleness, receiving kindly the rich and the poor who flee to his clemency and entrust themselves to his faithfulness.” These are the basics we must know about God if we are ever to come to know him. But, says Calvin, to know these things and to have them clear in our minds is not yet to know God. For knowledge of God, *cognitio Dei*, is relational knowledge, knowledge that comes to us, as was said above, in the relationship of commitment, trust and reliance—in other words, of faith.



Then the fourth point is this. Knowing God is in fact more than knowing God. It involves knowing ourselves as needy creatures and lost sinners, for it is precisely a matter of knowing God in his saving relationship to us, that relationship in which he takes pity on us in our sinfulness and lovingly gives himself and his gifts to us for our renewal and enrichment. In other words, knowledge of God occurs only where there is knowledge of ourselves and our need and thankful reception of God's gifts to meet our need. Calvin is right! The knowledge of God and of ourselves—these two things together—does in truth make up the sum of our wisdom. In fact, we do not begin to know God until we know God's gracious gift of a Savior offered to us in our weakness, sin and wretchedness. For God is not a passive object that we can inspect and examine when and as we wish; he is an active subject who relates to us not on our terms but on his. And his terms are that we must be realistic about ourselves and approach him in conscious unworthiness, as drowning souls begging for a lifeline. Only to those who approach him so does he give himself covenantally and relationally. Only they, therefore, come to know God.

This brings us to the point where we can speak positively of what knowing God is, and we can now declare that knowing God by faith, according to the Scriptures, is three things together: it is *apprehension* of who and what he is; it is *application* to ourselves of what he gives; and it is *adoration* of him, the Giver. Let Calvin say this to us in his own terms: "The knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive, that is, form the concept of there being a God, but we also grasp what benefits us, what profits us, from his giving. Nor shall we say that God is, strictly speaking, known where there is no religion or godliness." Calvin delineates here the response of humble adoration and worship by lip, by heart and in life. Again, Calvin says this: "We are called to a knowledge of God which does not just flit about in



the brain,” that is, rest content with bare notions and empty speculations. Knowledge of God, he says, is not merely a matter of ideas but is a knowledge that, if we rightly grasp it and allow it to take root in our hearts, will be “solid” and “fruitful.” By “solid,” he means firmly rooted and fixed; by “fruitful,” he means “life-changing.” So true knowledge of God means bringing forth the fruit of Christlikeness. Again he says: “The knowledge of God is not identified with cold speculation, but brings with it worship of him” (*Institutes* 1.2).

### HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

This, then, is what knowing God meant to Calvin and what it means (so I am persuaded, as he was) in the Scriptures. But how does this knowledge of God come about? What are the means of our knowing God? The usual Christian formula is that knowledge of God depends upon God’s special, gracious, saving revelation of himself to us—in other words, that our knowledge and God’s revelation are correlative, the former deriving from the latter. That is right. Yet sometimes I find myself wishing that in place of that word *revelation* we could form the habit of substituting another word that I think in modern discussion and debate would express more. In place of “revelation” I would like to say “communication.” The word *revelation* suggests to modern minds little more than a general display or exhibition of something. I believe it is very important, when we think of the revelation of God, always to keep in view its nature as personal communication from the Creator to his creatures.

*Communication* suggests someone approaching us, coming close to us, speaking to us, telling us about himself, opening his mind to us, giving us what he has, telling us what he knows, asking for our attention and seeking our response to what he is saying.



This is the true idea of divine revelation, on which we must always keep our minds clear.

At this point, however, there is a specific problem at which we have hinted already. God made the human race in order that he might communicate himself to us and draw us into loving fellowship with himself. This was always his purpose. But we have turned away from God; sin has come in; human nature has become twisted. The human race is now radically anti-God in all its basic attitudes. The human race is not interested in fellowship with God. It is no longer in our nature to love God or to respond to God in any kind of worship. We have our back to God, we might say. In consequence of the Fall it is now human nature to do over and over what Adam and Eve are found doing in Genesis 3, that is, hiding from God so as to avoid having to face our guilt and so as to establish independence of him in the way we live.

We treat ourselves as though we were God. We live for ourselves; we are self-servers; we seek to bend everything to our own interests. In doing this we fight God—the real God. We say no to him. We push him away from the center of our life to its circumference. We keep him at bay because it is our nature to do that. So God’s communication to us in our sin has to do more than simply present truth to our mind; it has to work in the human heart and alter fallen human nature.

Let us back up a moment. There is, says Calvin (and we have begun to see him saying this already), a universal self-communication by God, a divine activity usually called “general revelation,” in the created order around us. And in our own nature, too, in our awareness of our own awesomely complex makeup and in the functioning of our consciences, there is revelation, that is, communication from God. Some sense of the reality of God and his claims comes through to us in the same way that an awareness of light comes through. It is immediate, pervasive, inescapable, undeniable.



Calvin is very strong on this. “God has so shown himself in the whole workmanship of this world that men cannot open their eyes without being forced to see him.” Again, “The orderly arrangement of the world is like a mirror in which we may contemplate the otherwise invisible God.” Once more: “The world is created for the display of God’s glory.” And “The world is the theater of God’s glory.” Again, “The Lord clearly displays both himself and his immortal kingdom in the mirror of his works.” And yet again, “In the splendor of the heavens there is presented to our view a lively image of God” (*Institutes* 1.5.1-2).

The awareness of the Creator, then, comes through in all our commerce with his creatures, as it does in all our knowledge and awareness of ourselves and our own identity, in the judgments on us of our conscience, and in many of the thoughts of our own hearts. But humanity’s way is to ignore or deny this awareness, or if we cannot deny it outright, to distort it and turn it into darkness and superstition. Thus the world, for all its fancied wisdom and multiple dreamed-up theologies, does not know God, even though this general communication of God through nature and inward experience is a reality for everyone. So says Calvin, following Paul (see Rom 1:18-23, 32; 2:12-16; 1 Cor 1:21). If, therefore, God is ever to be acknowledged, worshiped and trusted as he should be, he not only must set his truth before us but must also give us eyes to see it, ears to hear it and hearts to receive it. And that, in fact, is precisely his agenda.

### **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THROUGH GRACE**

What God has done is to add to this general communication of himself in the natural order a special communication of himself in grace. In this process three stages need to be distinguished. Stage one was achieving *redemption in history*. By words and by works, God made himself known on the stage of history in saving action.



The words were basic, for first God declared what he was going to do; then, after making the announcement, he acted, fulfilling his word and doing what he said. That is how it was at the exodus, when he saved Israel out of captivity in Egypt. That is what he did when in the fullness of time he sent his own Son, born of a woman, to redeem those who were under the law, sinners like you and me, so that we might receive the gift of adoption and so become children in his family.

Stage two was recording *revelation in writing*. That was the work of God inspiring the Holy Scriptures. God caused to be written interpretive records of what he had said and done, so that all generations might know of the redemptive revelation in history that he had made. The written record is our Bible, which has Jesus Christ the Redeemer as its central focus.

The third stage in the communicative process is securing *reception by individuals* of the realities of redemption declared in the Scriptures, a reception that becomes a reality through the work of the Holy Spirit. God's word to the world is the message of new life in Christ. The Holy Spirit opens hearts to give this word entrance and renews hearts so that we might turn around again to face God. We thus become new creatures in Christ.

When the New Testament speaks of God revealing himself to human beings, it is this third stage in the process of divine communication that is in view. When Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27), he had in mind the enlightening impact of his teaching through the Holy Spirit. And it appears that when Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this [my identity as God's Christ] was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17), he meant that Simon had been enlightened to see the meaning of things he had heard Jesus say and seen him do during the previous months.



Paul uses the word *reveal* in the same way when he says in Galatians that God “was pleased to reveal his Son in me” (Gal 1:15-16). The Greek says, “in me,” that is, in a way that convinced Paul’s heart. Paul lost his sight physically for a few days but gained his sight spiritually forever. The truth about Jesus, risen Savior and Lord, had been told to him before, but he had been blind to it; now the eyes of his heart were opened, and he saw. The same thought is expressed by Paul in other words when he says in 2 Corinthians 4:6 that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Often this third stage of God’s revelatory work is called illumination. John expresses it in words that we quoted earlier: “the Son of God . . . has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true” (1 Jn 5:20).

Do you see now that stage two in the process, the inspiring of the Bible, is absolutely crucial? Calvin regularly referred to the Bible as the “oracles of God,” a phrase found in Romans 3:2, which the NIV renders as “the very words of God.” Calvin took it and used it again and again to express the thought that what we have in Scripture is God’s own witness to his work of salvation. Calvin’s view is that the Bible through the Spirit has a double function in relation to us sin-blinded sinners. It functions both as our schoolmaster, teaching us the truth, operating as the rule for our own teaching and speaking, and also as our spectacles, enabling us to see God clearly.

Calvin’s illustration speaks much to me because I am nearsighted. If I take off my glasses, I cannot see anything or anyone clearly. I can see only a set of smudges. Calvin, who himself was nearsighted, says, in effect, that the natural man without the Scriptures has no more than a smudgy awareness that there is a divine something or someone there; he or she does not know who the something or the someone is. But, says Calvin, when nearsighted persons put on



their glasses, they see clearly what before was only a smudge. Likewise, when we begin to study the Scriptures, we begin to see clearly him of whom we had that unclear awareness. The Scriptures serve us as glasses, focusing for us and in us our awareness of God and showing us precisely who and what this God is.

So Calvin opposes any form of theology that seeks to operate apart from the Scriptures. He denounces it as ungodly speculation and summons us to that humility that acknowledges need and is willing to be taught from the written word. Unfortunately, much theology today is speculative in the sense that he condemned. It patronizes the Scriptures; it stands above the Scriptures, going beyond and away from them. Such theology, no matter how learned, is trash, says Calvin. As one whose profession obliges him to spend a great deal of his time reading it, I can only endorse that opinion. All theology that moves away from the Scripture is basically trash, and one of the miseries of the modern church is that much of its literature, preaching and thinking is so much trash at this point.

What is called for now, as in Calvin's day, is the humility that bows before the Scriptures and accepts them as instruction from God. They are God preaching, God talking, God telling, God instructing, God setting before us the right way to think and speak about him. The Scriptures are God showing us himself: God communicating to us who he is and what he has done so that in the response of faith we may truly know him and live our lives in fellowship with him. Interpreting Scripture is often said to be a problem, but those who read the Bible as God's teaching, given in the form and through the means of human teaching, will find its message constantly coming through clearly—often more clearly than is comfortable. Then the question is not whether we understand but whether we are going to believe and obey.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, put it this way: "I am a creature of a day . . . hovering over the great gulf; till . . . I drop into



an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. . . . God himself has . . . written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. . . . I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I . . . read his book . . . to find the way to heaven. . . . I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: ‘Lord . . . let me know thy will.’” Do you identify with that? Do you go along with John Wesley in his attitude to his Bible as a supreme gift of God’s grace? This Word is what the world must have if it is ever to know God. Thank God for it, then, and value and prize it.

At the coronation of the sovereign of England, the moderator of the Church of Scotland presents him or her with a Bible and speaks of it as—I quote the words exactly—“the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom,” he continues; “this is the royal Law; these are the lively oracles of God.” That is utterly true, and so we may say that Christ and the Scriptures belong together as twin gifts of the grace of God. Authentic theology begins here, in recognition of this truth and in glad submission to the teaching of Scripture, from which we learn of our Savior and the path of eternal life. Authentic knowledge of God begins here, too, and the following chapters will spell out some of its contents as the Bible presents them.



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