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## Repose in Mystery: The Limit of Sobriety According to John Calvin

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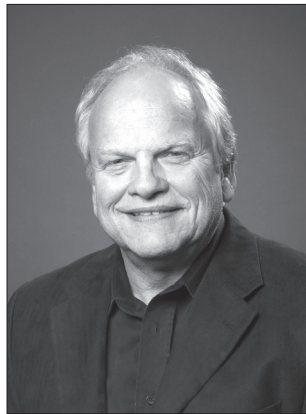
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# Repose in Mystery: The Limit of Sobriety According to John Calvin

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by Jan van Vliet

## Introduction

Herman Bavinck echoes Calvin when he asserts that “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics....It is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself.”<sup>1</sup> From particularly Calvin’s commentaries and his *Institutes*, it would be accurate to say that the default position in all of Calvin’s theologizing is awe at the mystery of God. Interestingly, this mystery drove him to doxology, which has been identified as a common refrain in Calvin’s work.<sup>2</sup> This paper reviews those areas of Calvin’s thought where

recourse to mystery is most evident, examines the character of the post-conservative movement in evangelicalism, and makes suggestions as to how the Calvinian (Pauline) concept of mystery may restore biblical spirituality to evangelicals.

## I. Calvin’s Use of Mystery

It is to be expected that many of these areas are found in those categories of Christian doctrine presenting the greatest challenge to logic. We begin by examining some of Calvin’s musings on creation as found in his Genesis commentary and move, successively, through the topics of Christology, predestination, and sacraments.

Disagreement over biblical cosmogony has characterized the church since its beginning. It was probably at the turn of the twentieth century with the reaction to modernism and the advances of science that, at least in the conservative Christian church, a particular view of creation came to dominate and was considered the test of orthodoxy. Such shibboleths have no foundation in the preceding millennium and a half of church history, however, which showed varying degrees of latitude when it came to the interpretation of the days in Genesis. Yet the battle that raged through much of the twentieth century still dogs the evangelical church today.

In his Genesis commentary we find Calvin the master exegete at work. His method is first and foremost to determine authorial intent. What did Moses intend, he asks? After he systematically works through preliminary yet significant issues

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such as the identity of “elohim” (v1) and the “Spirit of God” (v2), he comes to v5 which closes with “And there was evening and there was morning – the first day.” Moses writes that once God created light, the first day had received its beginning.

In his comments, Calvin is controverting those who maintain that God created all things instantaneously. He is categorically stating that there was *duration* in God’s creative acts, which is signified by God’s division of his original creative power into six days. And what is meant by the phrase “the first day”?

Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil [trivial objection] to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather conclude that God took himself the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men. We slightly pass over the infinite glory of God, which here shines forth; whence arises this but from our excessive dulness [*sic*] in considering his greatness. In the meantime, the vanity of our minds carries us away elsewhere. For the correction of this fault, God applied the most suitable remedy when he distributed the creation of the world into successive portions, that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he had laid his hand upon us, to pause and reflect.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, what exactly God meant when he divided his original creative acts into six days we are not sure. We do not know more about the nature of those six days. But we do know this: God took these six days (however we might understand it) to communicate creation to humanity in terms of reference they would understand. This is as far as Calvin is willing to go. Why? Because of humanity’s incapacity to understand the greater things of God. God reached down in gracious condescension and, in a gesture of accommodation, gave us categories we could work with. Although most of the reformers held, as did Calvin, to six-day creationism, Calvin emphasizes here the reason that God chose the period of six days – accommodation.

I will come back to the concept of “accommodation” presently. Conceptually, it is of course very closely related to the topic of this paper: the mystery of God. It is because God is, ultimately, unknow-

able, that he comes to us in an act of accommodation. Elsewhere in the creation narrative, Calvin explains God’s way of communicating by appealing to humanity’s ability to exercise their rational capacities: “Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endowed with common sense, are able to understand.... Moses adapts his discourse to common usage.”<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the present example, Calvin is content to bow before the awesome mystery of God and to say no more than what he has *biblical warrant* for saying. At minimum, says Calvin, this the bible tells us for sure: that God did not create instantaneously—although he easily could have—because of our creaturely understanding. We are time bound, and God transcends time. In fact, he used a tool he created in order to display his creative activity to us, and that tool was the partition of the “space” of creation into six days.<sup>5</sup> What we do not know for sure is the nature of these days, but here Calvin, in silence, reposes in the mystery of God.

As we move to Calvin’s Christology, we find similar reasoning. The mystery of Christ is to be preserved. When addressing the hypothetical question of whether Christ would have come incarnate if there had been no adamic sin, he responds in a fashion significantly different from Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*. Because of the distance separating the Creator and the creature, Calvin intones, the most we can say from logic is this: “[E]ven if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is surely God’s greatest act of condescension, by which we have access to the impenetrable mystery that is God. But, ultimately, the sending of Christ cannot be logically explained. It comes to us by “heavenly decree.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, “since we learn that Christ himself was divinely appointed to help miserable sinners, whoever leaps over these bounds too much indulges foolish curiosity.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, says Calvin,

Paul soars to the lofty mystery of predestination and fitly restrains all the wantonness and itching curiosity of human nature.... All who propose to inquire or seek to know more about Christ than God ordained by his secret decree are breaking out in impious boldness to fashion some new sort of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin is jealous to guard the mystery which is the incarnate Christ.

Similarly does he treat the topic of predestination, election being a mark of God's gratuitous goodness.<sup>10</sup> But because of the mysteriousness and loftiness of this biblical teaching, Calvin spends 3.5 per cent of the *Institutes* on the formal discussion of this doctrine. In his commentary on the Petrine epistles, he graciously asserts that we can never know for certain, nor should we "inquire curiously"

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about the predestined status of fellow Christians. In fact, he says generously that by the judgment of charity, we "ought on the contrary to regard their calling, so that all who are admitted by faith into the church, are to be counted as the elect."<sup>11</sup>

It is, of course, in his first commentary, on Paul's letter to the Romans, that Calvin goes on at great length because here the text forces the expositor to deal with this difficult subject. He draws our attention to Paul's humility early on in Romans 3 (v. 5), where Paul talks about God's faithfulness. If God is glorified in our unrighteousness, then why are we punished? If due to our unrighteousness God's righteousness is exalted, then why are we instruments of his wrath? How is this fair and logical? Calvin, with Paul, finds no satisfactory answer. Again, this is where logic fails us. The work of human reason "is ever to bark against the wisdom of God," for all the "mysteries of God are paradoxes to the flesh." Instead of barking, however, we should labor hard to submissively seek escape from our bondage to reason.<sup>12</sup>

A clear Calvinian principle comes to the fore in his remarks on the *locus classicus* of original sin, Romans 5: the height of God's grace in Christ can be seen only against the depth of our fall in Adam.<sup>13</sup> Recall that it is in this manner that he begins his *Institutes*. We can get some sense of who

and what humanity is *only* when we view humanity in juxtaposition to who and what God is. And vice versa. So great is the mystery of God that knowledge of him can be only approached in dialectic and in reflecting on what he is not – apophatic theology. This comparison, acknowledges Calvin, is incomplete. It is not entirely satisfying. In his sketch of the likeness between Adam and Christ, he probes all the points of difference between Christ and Adam (and by extension all humanity) until an incommensurability surfaces ("there is a greater measure of grace procured by Christ, than of condemnation introduced by the first man"). While that may make for what he calls "defects in discourse," these defects are "not prejudicial" to the majesty of God.<sup>14</sup> Rather, "the highest mysteries [of God's will] have been delivered to us in the garb of an humble style, in order that our faith may not depend on the potency of human eloquence but on the efficacious working of the Spirit alone."<sup>15</sup> The inestimable mysteries of God and his ways are approached not through logic and human categories but in submissive faith. For "the wisdom of the flesh is ever clamorous against the mysteries of God,"<sup>16</sup> says Calvin, as he reminds us that Christ himself, in John 3:12, spoke of heavenly mysteries in less dignified terms with the purpose of accommodating himself to the limited capacities of "a people ignorant and simple."<sup>17</sup>

Calvin invokes mystery in full force in Romans 9. The reason is clear: Paul is debating the equity of the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau, particularly as found in verses 11-12, where we read (NIV), "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—[Rebekah] was told, 'the older will serve the younger.'"

One editor (Henry Beveridge) charges Calvin with going "somewhat beyond the limits of revelation" in the supralapsarian tendencies he finds in Calvin. Beveridge observes,

That it was God's eternal purpose to choose some of man's fallen race, and to leave others to perish, is clearly taught us: but this is a different question from the one touched upon here—that his purpose was irrespective of man's fall—a sentiment which, as far as I can see, is not recognized nor

taught in Scripture.... [It] is true, by a process of reasoning apparently obvious; but when we begin to reason on this high and mysterious subject, we become soon bewildered and lost in mazes of difficulties.<sup>18</sup>

Could Calvin possibly have violated his own sacred axiom: that where logic fails, mystery takes over? Could he himself be indulging the irrepressible urge to enter the recesses of God's mind and thus lose himself in the labyrinth of speculation? For "the predestination of God is indeed in reality a labyrinth from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself." We should seek to know nothing concerning [predestination] except what Scripture teaches us: when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may go no further."<sup>19</sup> Could Calvin himself be coming under the intoxicating spell of the progression of logic? Is he "absurdly measure[ing] this incomparable mystery of God by [his] own judgment?"<sup>20</sup>

An editorial comment in the *Institutes* makes a similar observation but stops short of charging Calvin with unbiblical speculation. Calvin's comments here are along the same lines as his comments on Romans 9:11—that God decreed the fall of Adam before he decreed to save. "This passage," observes John T. McNeill, "briefly shows Calvin as favoring the supralapsarian as opposed to the infralapsarian view of the decrees of God."<sup>21</sup>

Calvin's observations here, however, as elsewhere, must be considered in light of his dominant hermeneutical key. And that is this: that in both election and reprobation, "no cause is adduced higher than the will of God."<sup>22</sup> In Romans 9:14-34, Paul, in wonderment, himself anticipates the questions that need asking. In this rhetorical line of interrogation, however, the final answer remains certain because far be it from the creature to consign the Creator to the dock. Paul gives no cause for why God does what he does. Calvin comments,

[A]s though the Spirit of God were silent for want of reason, and not rather, that by his silence he reminds us, that a mystery which our minds cannot comprehend ought to be reverently adored, and that he thus checks the wantonness of human curiosity. . . . regarding our weakness, he leads us to moderation and sobriety.<sup>23</sup>

In an appeal to Isaiah 45:9 and with echoes of Book 1 of *Institutes*, Calvin reminds the reader of the destiny of those who, as Isaiah put it, "speak against [their] maker."<sup>24</sup> Humans should surely not think of themselves as loftier than the earthen vessel they are, formed, as they are, by God, the divine potter. The secret counsel of God, explaining the preparation of both the elect and the reprobate for their last end, is finally an incomprehensible and "inexplicable" mystery.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing this reality, avers Calvin, should motivate us to embrace this grace of God with humility and trembling.<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of God's ways, the end of all mystery, Paul finally reveals.<sup>27</sup> In the closing verses of Romans 11, Paul launches into doxology. In a burst of song and praise, he quotes the prophet Isaiah and Job on the incomprehensibility and the incomparability of the God with whom we have to do. This is why we must set a bridle on our thoughts and tongues. Our reasoning must end, finally, in admiration. And we must recognize that God has a will that he has revealed to us in Scripture, but he also has a secret counsel. We must be aware of the distinction! It is only with the help of the Holy Spirit that we have access to God's revealed will, and we must stop where the Spirit ceases to lead us, lest the excessively curious and the impiously audacious<sup>28</sup> "be overwhelmed by the immeasurable brightness of inaccessible light."<sup>29</sup>

Finally, a few words on Calvin's concept of mystery as it relates to the sacraments.

Even if much of Calvin's reference to the sacraments as mystery is due to the language and translation issues between the Vulgate and the Greek versions of the Bible,<sup>30</sup> the sacraments underscore the mystery of God further. There is no difference between circumcision and baptism, says Calvin, when their inner mystery is considered: "Whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism."<sup>31</sup> It is an anagogic relationship whose mysterious meaning is given to each in proportion to his/her faith. Faith is operative here because of the lofty mystery hidden in the sacraments, mysteries moving the believer, upon seeing the sacraments, to rise up in "devout contemplation."<sup>32</sup>

In navigating through the many questions arising, primarily, from transubstantiation, one senses Calvin reaching for concepts and language to ar-

ticulate a position on the sacraments that dismisses the Roman Church's understanding of them while underscoring the sanctity with which they should be considered. As profound as the external ceremonies are, both sacraments are properly understood only when considered in light of their promise and spiritual mysteries.<sup>33</sup> The spiritual presence of Christ in communion is, in fact, a "felt mystery," a "sacred mystery" impossible to explain.<sup>34</sup> Two things are to be guarded against: first, divorcing the signs from their mysteries and second, denying or obscuring the mysteries. This feeding on Christ is to immortality, indeed, a high mystery!<sup>35</sup>: "Christ's flesh itself in the mystery of the Supper is a thing no less spiritual than our eternal salvation."<sup>36</sup> It can be "no other eating than that of faith"<sup>37</sup> because this is simply impossible to comprehend with the mind.<sup>38</sup> The spiritual partaking of Christ is the actual partaking of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Appreciation of this mystery should guard against abuse.<sup>40</sup>

There remains a handful of doctrines, the understanding of which eludes natural humanity. In all these places, as expected, Calvin invokes the concept of mystery.<sup>41</sup>

## II. Calvin Defines "Mystery"—the Key "Accommodation"

But what does Calvin actually mean by "mystery"? Although by definition it defies description, Calvin gives a partial answer in his commentary on Titus 1:3. Part of understanding the mystery of God is to place bounds around our inordinate curiosity in humble acceptance that God "does everything in the proper order and at the most seasonable time."<sup>42</sup> This point echoes the hermeneutical principle he invokes in his sermon on Deuteronomy 29:29,<sup>43</sup> where Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of the law." There is an "antithesis," says Calvin, between God's clear counsel, openly set forth in his word, and "the hidden and incomprehensible counsel of God, concerning which it is not lawful to inquire."<sup>44</sup> Some things, he says, God has reserved only to himself. Rather than coveting the disclosure of these secrets of which there is no revelation in the holy scriptures, as do some "fanatical heads," we must rather abstain with all modesty

and submission. Finally,

We must hold us still when God has not spoken of an unknown thing and which is not in holy scripture....Let us keep ourselves in sobriety and temperance....Let us seek that only, which God would have us to know, and let us be ignorant of all the rest, yea, and let us be willingly ignorant of it, knowing that our true wisdom is to be learned alone in his school.<sup>45</sup>

This position has come to be known as the dual will of God: his revealed will and his concealed will. Yet, says Calvin, "God's will is one and undivided, but because our minds cannot plumb the deep abyss of his secret election, to meet our inadequacy God's will is set before us as two-fold."<sup>46</sup> This conceptualization of God's mystery is itself an accommodative act of God.

For Calvin, this principle of accommodation is closely related to the conception of God as mystery or hidden. Accommodation is the route by which we have access to the mystery of God insofar as God himself allows that access. The much-quoted definition articulated by Edward A. Dowey, Jr., still says it the best:

The term "accommodation" refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.<sup>47</sup>

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Thus, God makes himself and his will, which are eminently mysterious, accessible to us by employing concepts and categories adjusted for our capacity—one constrained by both finitude and sin. But this revelation is only partial. It hides as much as it reveals.<sup>48</sup> Calvin himself discusses his understanding of the enigmatic mystery of God, impenetrable to the human mind.<sup>49</sup>

When we hear this word, *mystery*, let us remember two things; first, that we learn to keep under our senses, and flatter not ourselves that we have sufficient knowledge and ability to comprehend so vast a matter. In the second place, let us learn to climb up beyond ourselves, and reverence that majesty which passes our understanding. We must not be sluggish nor drowsy; but think upon this doctrine, and endeavor to become instructed therein. When we have acquired some little knowledge thereof, we should strive to profit thereby, all the days of our life.<sup>50</sup>

Acknowledgement of this mystery should bring us to our knees in adoration and worship.

The ongoing relationship between the Creator and the creature, explains Dowey, “is permeated in an almost uncanny manner with the immediate presence of a mysterious will. . . . Man is consciously surrounded by its work.”<sup>51</sup> Calvin, says Dowey, is no “nature mystic,” in whom sub-personal metaphysical categories are determinative of theology, as is clearly demonstrated by the way in which he opens his *Institutes*.<sup>52</sup> Metaphysical speculation about the being or existence of God finds no place here. Ultimately, glorifying God is the goal of God’s self revelation – his accommodation – to humanity. This end is attained not through metaphysical speculation but through an epistemological exercise in which knowledge of God and knowledge of self lead to worship and obedience.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the concept of accommodation is “the horizon of Calvin’s theology.”<sup>54</sup> For “[Calvin] never ventured to attach anything but the name of incomprehensible mystery to what lay beyond that horizon, yet he maintained stoutly that *it is God’s mystery, not an abyss of nothingness*. The mystery belongs to the unknowable side of the known God.”<sup>55</sup> This unknowableness is due not to the lack of clarity of the revelation but rather to the noetic effects of sin. Rather than seek to create a theological system that was rationally coherent and stripped of all mystery, Calvin opted for a theology characterized by logical inconsistencies and paradox. As Dowey notes, “clarity of individual themes, incomprehensibility of their interrelations – this is a hallmark of Calvin’s theology.”<sup>56</sup> And it is so, only because that is how God reveals himself in Scripture.

### III. Mystery and Mysticism

The (inter) relationship between mysticism and Calvin’s understanding of mystery is a complicated one. In Christian literature, the expression the “Unknown God” of Acts 17:23 came to mean the “total otherness of deity.” Philosophically, this doctrine of God’s unknowability, a key element in the conceptualization of the doctrine of God’s mysteriousness, has its roots in the thought of Philo Judaeus.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps Calvin’s invocation of mystery was to distinguish the God of the Bible from that of the mystery religions – derived from primitive tribal ceremonies – that were so popular in the first three centuries of the Christian era.<sup>58</sup> It is held by some that Dionysius was one of the few in the audience convinced by Paul’s address in the Areopagus; since then, legend has elevated him to significant stature, and his name has been attached to a body of mystical writings which have been described as “a moving tribute to the unknown God.”<sup>59</sup> It was John Scotus Erigena, who mediated the theological vocabulary of Dionysius the Areopagite, into the Western and mystical tradition, “especially in the form of the familiar ‘way of negation’<sup>60</sup>—apophatic theology. Scholars have noticed Luther’s congeniality with the language of the mystical tradition; Calvin, however, refers to Dionysius’ claims as “mere prattle.”<sup>61</sup>

What precisely was the late medieval understanding of mystery before the time of Calvin? What was this “prattle”? Although there are certainly connections between the medieval understanding of mysticism and Calvin, there are significant differences. Perhaps that is why Calvin shows reluctance to speak of religious experience using this nomenclature: “The term ‘mystical’ has suggested confusion with the Greco-Roman mystery religions, identification with the Neo-Platonism of the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius, and the errors of Gnosticism and quietism.”<sup>62</sup> If we define mysticism as “a doctrine or discipline maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought,”<sup>63</sup> then we should not be surprised to see Calvin balk at such spirituality, so-called. Experience, intuition, instinct—as valuable as these might be—are not sufficient to grant entry into the mystery of God, much less if such spiritu-

ality, has, as teleological focus, *theosis* or divination. For Calvin, as for Luther before him, Paul taught *simul justus et peccator*. This is significantly different from our “mystical union with Christ the head,” to use a phrase of common currency in classical theology. Calvin’s concept is much more epistemologically focused; spiritual experience is always guided by and guarded by Scripture. Although much of Calvin’s teaching on the mystery or hiddenness of God is noetically based, mystery for Calvin is ultimately the only answer to the knowability of God, whether epistemic or non-epistemic. This mystery is not something approached through instinct or insight or hierarchies of angels or the hierarchy of the church, as Pseudo-Dionysius taught. Perhaps it is true that as Western theology developed with

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increasingly sharp distinctions between reason and revelation, theologians became interested in what truths about God could be established by reason alone. The result was nothing more than to speak of God by way of negatives, “theology by way of negation.”<sup>64</sup>

While Calvin obviously makes use of apophatic theology (particularly in Book 1 of the *Institutes*), it would be a mistake to conclude that this is his hermeneutical key. For he also speaks of positive conceptions (cataphatic theology) and, moreover, presents the exercise of coming to the knowledge of God through a correlative encounter between the Creator and the creature in an epistemological rather than metaphysical way. That Calvin considered medieval mysticism as “mere prattle” was no doubt its highly subjective nature, a way of the Christian life without scriptural support.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous to maintain that, for Calvin, knowledge of the mystery was exclusively a rational exercise. Experience played a role as well. If we think of the Hebraic un-

derstanding of wisdom as we have it portrayed for us by the sage in the book of Proverbs, we are closer to the truth as to what Calvin meant by his concept of “knowledge.” When Calvin teaches about the knowledge of God and self through use of the principle of correlation, he does so because we see as through a glass darkly, and we can understand God (and self) only by means of such a correlative process. But he does not exclude subjective knowledge of God. Calvin’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit should guard against anyone accusing Calvin of intellectualizing the faith. Both objective rational knowledge and subjective personal experience are operative in coming into the mystery of God. This combination leads to a knowledge of God that is always true, if never exhaustive. For this reason, Calvin would distance himself from the prattle of medieval mysticism and its associated and closely related practice of contemplative prayer, in which the rational aspect of the mind is held in abeyance.<sup>65</sup> The medieval definitions of both mysticism and contemplative prayer significantly attenuate, if not outright dismiss, the crucial role the mind plays in our knowledge of the mystery.

#### **IV. Evangelicalism and Mystery: A Recommended Approach**

The Christian centuries following the Reformation have all played a part in adjusting Reformation thought and method in various directions. Although Calvin adopted the principle of *sola scriptura* as his guide in all theological endeavor and adjudication of controversy, often to consciously and explicitly critique the system of the Schoolmen, that principle did not prevent him from using the scholastic method (the use of dialectic and logic, for example). Calvin, the scriptural exegete, found value and help in the method of the scholastics: “It was impossible either to purge all scholastic methods and attitudes derived from classical authors or to avoid conflicts that required intricate theological reasoning as well as biblical interpretation.”<sup>66</sup> Similar methods can be used to accomplish dissimilar purposes; for the schoolmen, the scholastic method was used to gain insights into (sometimes extra-biblical) metaphysics (the question of existence of God, for example). For Calvin, a similar method was used to enlarge his



understanding of epistemological issues, with solid biblical presuppositions in place (Scripture assumes God exists). But it is not always easy to distinguish style from substance. And without entering the now somewhat tired debate about the continuity of Calvin's thought with that of his successors, it is surely a mistake of the highest idealism to hold that form and content do not inter-penetrate. As Marshal McLuhan has said, "The medium is the message."<sup>67</sup>

In the wake of the Reformation, evangelicalism has been understood, characterized, and defined as many things,<sup>68</sup> but one thing appears sure: there is a move to a more pietistic, subjective expression of Christianity, on the grounds that the faith has been intellectualized through the centuries that modernity reigned. In its aftermath—in this the postmodern period—a renaissance of experiential Christianity is on the rise.<sup>69</sup> This renaissance can be witnessed in a number of ways, chief of which has been a restoration of the practice of Christian mysticism. This practice is particularly true of what have been called "post-conservative evangelicals," an evangelical sub-group that continues to subscribe to generally accepted features of evangelicalism, ignores the "acids of modernity," and seeks a more experiential, subjective center.<sup>70</sup>

I want to briefly examine this post-conservative view of Christian life and spirituality because what is important to post-conservatives is to retreat from what are perceived to be the triumphal claims of the modern mind on Christian life and experience. This project of "revisioning," to use Stanley Grenz's term, centers on experience and the associated subjective spirituality to which it gives birth.<sup>71</sup> In this view, conversion is primary and is lived experience and doxology. Theology is a "second-order reflection on the faith of the converted people of God."<sup>72</sup> In their approach to theology, post-conservatives are seeking an alternative to the "evangelical Enlightenment,"<sup>73</sup> eschewing "epistemological certainty" and "theological systems"<sup>74</sup> on the grounds that all human knowing is perspectival and paradigm-dependent. In fact, Grenz "emphasizes experience over supernaturally revealed propositional truth as the heart of Christian theology."<sup>75</sup>

It should not surprise us that medieval mysticism holds such attraction to this group. If certain-

ty is found in subjective experience, if determining biblical propositional truth is not the first order task of the theologian, in concert with which a spiritual Christianity is constructed, then an experiential subjectivism rules the day.

Much has been written in the intervening decade and a half since these observations and recommendations on doing theology in a postmodern context were made. But this period has also witnessed both the truth and the results of such evangelical Christianity: The attraction of a return to the monastic lifestyle (although in 21<sup>st</sup>-century expression),<sup>76</sup> the magnetic appeal of medieval mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, and the renewed use of aids to enhance the mystical spirituality of the believers such as moving through stages of the cross. It is perhaps helpful to remember Benjamin B. Warfield's assessment of mysticism:

It is characteristic of mysticism that it makes its appeal to the feelings as the sole, or at least as the normative, source of knowledge of divine things. That is to say, it is the religious sentiment which constitutes for it the source of religious knowledge. Of course mystics differ with one another in the consistency with which they apply their principle. And of course they differ with one another in the account they give of this religious sentiment to which they make their appeal. There are, therefore, many varieties of mystics, pure and impure, consistent and inconsistent, naturalistic and supernaturalistic, pantheistic and theistic — even Christian. *What is common to them all, and what makes them all mystics, is that they all rest on the religious sentiment as the source of knowledge of divine things.*<sup>77</sup>

The postmodern mind is amenable to mystery. For that we are thankful. And it may be true that the modern emphasis on logical coherence and propositions has darkened the theological tunnel somewhat and has enervated the Christian experience. But there is a way to satisfy the deepest spiritual longings of the pious Christian other than to resort to exclusively subjective experience. Surely this approach is just as dangerous as over-intellectualizing the faith. Christianity should neither pass under the guise of arid intellectualism nor adopt a warm, fuzzy emotionalism. A wishy-washy faith is as unbiblical as

a rigid, arid one. Rather than jumping too quickly into a mysticism which, if not straight up unbiblical, is at times suspect, we should remember that all of our constitutive elements must be involved in the doxological act of worshiping and glorifying the God whom we seek to know. A healthy respect for the hiddenness of God, for the mystery, should be our limit of sobriety. We should seek to direct the postmodern Christian mind to biblical meditation. Building on the theology of John Calvin, the Puritans were masters at respecting the mystery that is God and, in true Pauline fashion, falling prostrate before this God, who is both incomprehensible and incomparable. None were better able to comprehend and articulate the mysterious paradoxes of God than the Puritans, whose tradition lasted from the late sixteenth century through the middle of the eighteenth, from William Perkins to Jonathan Edwards. If we can recapture the biblical theory and practice of meditation as understood by the Puritans, and if we can avoid the bouts of dependency and spiritual depression that sometimes plagued them, then our theological methodology would prove faithful to Scripture and to the mystery of the God who wrote it.

### Endnotes

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 29.
2. By Sinclair Ferguson in *Living to God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 387-96.
3. John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (Edinburgh/Carlisle: Banner of Truth trust, 1965, 1984), 78.
4. *Ibid.*, 86-87.
5. Recalling Augustine's dictum that God did not create *in* time, he created *with* time.
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics, no. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.12.1. My convention for citing from *Institutes* is by book, chapter and section.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Institutes*, 2.12.4.
9. *Institutes*, 2.12.5.
10. *Calvin Commentaries*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 23, ed. and trans. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958). At [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/vii.ii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/vii.ii.iii). Accessed 01/16/16.
11. *Ibid.*, at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/iv.ii.i](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/iv.ii.i). Accessed 01/16/16. A Calvinian sentiment in clear contradistinction to the sad parody of Calvin's teaching of predestination promoted by many of his detractors.
12. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/vii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/vii.iii). Accessed 01/16/16.
13. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/ix.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/ix.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
14. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm). Accessed 01/16/16. Among other points of comparison, a key one centers on the "many" descendents of Adam and the "many" believers in Christ. And whether "many" means "all" as is stated in Romans 5:18 (but then a reversion back to many in the next verse).
15. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm). Accessed 01/16/16.
16. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
17. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vii). Accessed 01/16/16.
18. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iii), n. 294. Accessed 01/16/16.
19. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iv](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iv). Accessed 01/16/16.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Institutes*, 2.12.5, n.5.
22. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.v](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.v). Accessed 01/16/16.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
26. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.ii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.ii). Accessed 01/16/16.
27. With a somewhat different nuancing of the word "mystery," Paul brings this significant section of Romans 9-11 to an end. He draws our attention to the mysterious fact of the restoration of the Jewish nation. This, no doubt, only matches the mystery of the call to the Gentiles that Paul taught elsewhere and the mystery of the unification of believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament church (Eph. 3:3-6). The fact of the restoration of the Jews, (and Gentiles,

- for that matter), remains a mystery and always will because it is hidden in the inscrutable counsel of God. Ibid. at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
28. *Institutes*, 2.12.5.
  29. Ibid. at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.viii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.viii). Accessed 01/16/16.
  30. *Institutes*, 4.14.3; the Greek *mysterion* has been translated as Latin *sacramentum* in the Vulgate. Calvin sees an “identity of meaning” between the two terms (*Institutes*, 4.14.1-2). For this reason he argues that “mysterion” in Eph 5:28, in reference to marriage, has been incorrectly translated as “sacramentum” (see *Institutes*, 4.19.35-36).
  31. *Institutes*, 4.16.4.
  32. *Institutes*, 4.14.5.
  33. *Institutes*, 4.16.2, 4.17.36.
  34. *Institutes*, 4.17.5.
  35. *Institutes*, 4.17.1.
  36. *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
  37. Ibid.
  38. *Institutes*, 4.17.6.
  39. *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
  40. Ibid.
  41. For example, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Kingdom, Romanism, and the Sabbath (*Institutes*, 1.13.17, 3.2.34, 4.10.12, and 2.8.29).
  42. Ibid. at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.v.iii.i.html>. Accessed 01/16/16.
  43. John Calvin, *The Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, trans. from the French by Arthur Golding (London: John Harrison, 1583), 1039-45; reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987). Brian A. Gerrish designates this as “hiddenness II” (the hiddenness of God outside his revelation), while “hiddenness I” refers to the hiddenness of God in revelation (revealed to us in “paradoxical mode”). See Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 134.
  44. Calvin, *Harmony of the Law* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom03/v.xxix](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom03/v.xxix). Accessed 01/16/16.
  45. Calvin, *Sermons upon Deuteronomie*, 1044-45, in modernized English.
  46. Cited by David F. Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, vol. 36 (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publisher, 1997), 3-19; p.3.
  47. Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.
  48. “Revelation is a veiling of the ‘naked majesty’ of God;” Gerrish summarizing Calvin [*Institutes*, 2.6.4] in Gerrish, 341, n. 60; see also Wright, 19.
  49. Gerrish, 142.
  50. John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness*, A sermon on 1 Tim. 3:16. At [www.the-highway.com/Mystery\\_of\\_Godliness.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Mystery_of_Godliness.html). Accessed 01/16/16.
  51. Dowey, Jr., *Knowledge of God*, 7.
  52. Ibid., 8.
  53. Ibid.
  54. Ibid., 17.
  55. Ibid., 17; my emphasis.
  56. Ibid., 40.
  57. See Henry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev., 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), vol. 2, chap. 11; cited in Gerrish, 335, n.4.
  58. The most popular of which was the cult of Demeter. Characteristic of these mystery religions was a secret sharing of meals, dance, ceremonies, initiation rites, singing, sexual activity, and wine. See *Britannica Encyclopedia* online <http://www.britannica.com/topic/mystery-religion>. Accessed 01/16/16.
  59. Gerrish, 132.
  60. Ibid.
  61. *Institutes*, 1.14.4. Elsewhere (commentary on Acts 17:34) Calvin seems to deny the identity of Dionysius the Areopagite with the author of the pseudo-Dionysian writings (C.O. 26:423), cited in Gerrish, 335, n6. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says the following: “Pseudo-Dionysius, in his various works, gave a systematic treatment of Christian Mysticism, carefully distinguishing between rational and mystical knowledge. By the former, he says, we know God, not in His nature, but through the wonderful order of the universe, which is a participation of the Divine ideas (“De Divinis Nomin”, c, vii, §§ 2-3, in P.G., III, 867 sq.). There is, however, he adds, a more perfect knowledge of God possible in this life, beyond the attainments of reason even enlightened by faith, through which the soul contemplates directly the mysteries of Divine light. The contemplation in the present life is possible only to a few privileged souls, through a very special grace of God: it is the *theosis, mystike enosis*” (at <http://>

www.newadvent.org/cathen/10663b.htm. Accessed 01/17/2016).

62. P. N. Hillyer, "Mystical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Packer, Ferguson, and Wright (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988), 448-49.
63. William E. Mann, "Mysticism" in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 515-16.
64. And nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural, and reason and revelation. On apophatic theology, also in the medieval tradition, going back to Pseudo-Dionysius, God was described by denying that any of our concepts can be properly affirmed of Him. It stresses the inadequacy of human language and concepts to say anything of God. It affirms the inadequacy of human understanding in matters Divine. On the other hand and by way of contrast, affirmative and symbolic theology is described by Pseudo-Dionysius as the soul rejecting all ideas and images of God and entering the "darkness that is beyond understanding," where it is "wholly united with the Ineffable."
65. "Contemplative prayer" is defined in many ways, but at the very least it is prayer that focuses on scriptural words or phrases but is prayer without words. It is a removal of conscious thought from the mind.
66. R J Vandermolten in *Elwell Evangelical Dictionary*; cited at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/indexaz.html>. Accessed 01/17/2009. Also Charles B. Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Westminster-John Knox, 2008).
67. The form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall\\_McLuhan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan). Accessed 01/17/2016).
68. For example, as a movement out of the Reformation, Protestantism, informed by both scholasticism and the pietist traditions, is beset by an internal tension between those who keep reason and experience separate and those who integrate the two; see Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).
69. This may represent evidence of the triumph of the pietist element in the evangelical family—the traditions of the awakenings—which holds the most promise for evangelicalism in a postmodern context. See Knight, *Future for Truth*.
70. Roger E. Olson in "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *The Christian Century*, May 3, 1995, pp. 480-483. The four features are, according to Bebbington: conversionism, or an emphasis on the "new birth" as a life-changing religious experience; biblicism, a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority; activism, a concern for sharing the faith; and crucicentrism, an emphasis on Christ's atoning work on the cross. He further describes this evangelical group as being broadly ecumenical, more at home in the Evangelical Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion than in the "older, stodgier" ETS, held captive by battles over inerrancy, higher criticism and liberal theology in general." He enumerates various interesting post-conservative adjustments to (some might call them assaults on) some fundamentals of orthodoxy, such as revelation (view of scripture), the notion of truth itself, Christology, classical theism, and more (Olson, 480f).
71. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity, 1993).
72. Olson, *ibid.*, 481.
73. Historian Mark Noll's phrase; see Olson, *ibid.*
74. Olson, *ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*, as Grenz's subsequent work has shown.
76. Rob Moll, "The New Monasticism," *Christianity Today*, 9/02/2005.
77. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Mysticism and Christianity" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991) vol. 9, pp. 649-66; my emphasis.