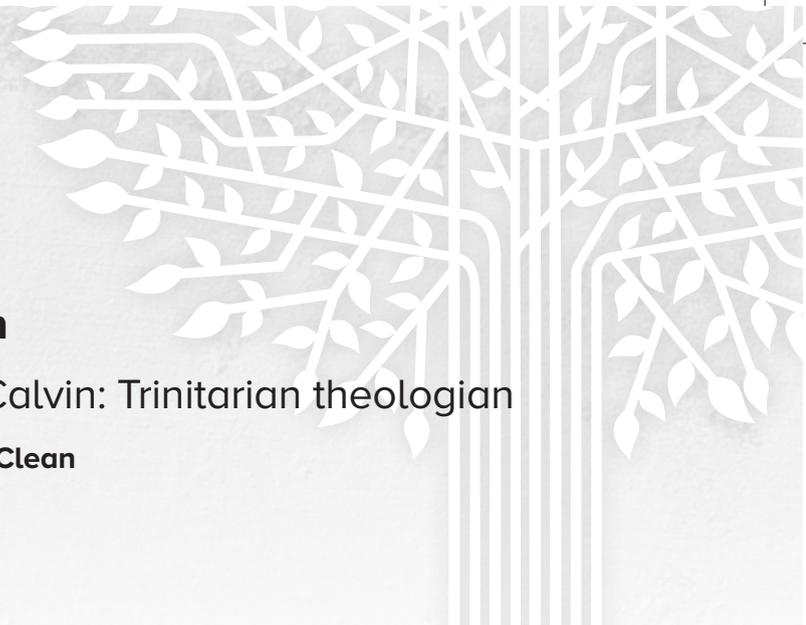


# CHURCH OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Understanding God's work  
in his people today

Edited by  
Michael Jensen



## Calvin

### John Calvin: Trinitarian theologian

John McClean

**R**OBERT DOYLE TAUGHT ME THAT THE DOCTRINE OF THE Trinity is key to all theology and to the Christian life. I count his classes on the doctrine of God as one of the great spiritual experiences of my life. He also introduced me to the excitement and significance of historical theology. So it is fitting and a great privilege to offer a study of the Trinitarian thought of John Calvin in Robert's honour. I pray that this chapter will help to show the glory and grace of the Triune God which Robert helped me to see.

#### The Servetus crisis

Early on Friday 27th October, 1553 John Calvin hurried through the streets of Geneva, heading to the gaol. The summer had been consumed by detailed and exhausting debate with his opponents in the city council. In mid-August the situation became more complicated by the arrival of the notorious Michael Servetus.

Servetus, a brilliant and eccentric Spaniard, was on the fringe of the Reformation for several decades. In the early 1530s he published two books in which he argued that the Bible calls for a simple heartfelt faith in the one God and that the doctrine of the Trinity creates atheists since a 'three-part God' is a philosophical fiction. Servetus' writings were banned by the Reformers in Basel and Strasbourg and condemned by the inquisition. To protect himself, Servetus took the name Michel de Villeneuve and worked

as a proofreader, teacher and doctor. From Vienne in France he wrote many letters to Calvin, who replied trying to correct his views, until he gave up in disgust. Servetus returned to public theological discussion in 1553 when he published *Christianismi restitutio* (The Restoration of Christianity), a seemingly deliberate allusion to Calvin's famous *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (the Institutes of Christian Religion). The book was condemned and the author would have been burned by the Roman Catholic authorities in Vienne if he had not escaped.

Servetus arrived in Geneva in August on his way to safety in Italy. He attended a service to hear Calvin preach and was recognised and arrested. Romans and Protestants around Europe waited to see if Geneva would be firm against heresy. Meanwhile, Calvin's own personal standing in Geneva was under great pressure from his opponents who wanted to ensure that the council remained free from the control of Calvin and his fellow pastors. The great point of contention was whether the pastors or council would adjudicate cases of church discipline and Servetus was a potential *cause célèbre*. Some of the pastors wondered if the opponents had brought Servetus to Geneva to stir trouble for them. Could Geneva deal with the case, given its internal tensions?

Servetus never lacked boldness. When he was questioned he went on the attack accusing Calvin of being 'Simon the Sorcerer' (Acts 8:9–24), the archetypal false teacher. According to Servetus the idea of one God who was three coequal persons was just so much sophistry which Calvin used to defend his own theological and political position.

Calvin was involved in the examination and trial of Servetus, but did not control it. Calvin's secretary, with his help, was the chief prosecutor while the council ran the trial. The council consulted the other Swiss Reformation cities for their advice on how to handle Servetus and each one supported a death sentence. Although some of the council tried to support Servetus, and most of the council were opposed to Calvin, and the proceedings were delayed because of tension in the council, finally on Thursday 26th October, Servetus was found guilty of heresy. He had rejected and lampooned the doctrine of the Trinity, calling the holy Trinity

a three-headed monster. With the verdict came a sentence for death and Servetus was to be burned at the stake the following morning. (Calvin tried to have the mode of execution moderated.)

Among all the political intrigue, the case was a clash of two theologies with fascinating similarities and differences. Servetus wanted to restore Christianity to a primitive simplicity of doctrine and the doctrine of the Trinity was central to the corruption of the church. Calvin was a Reformer, yet for him the doctrine of God taught by the church Fathers was the biblical doctrine and the true God could only be known and worshipped as the one-in-three and three-in-one. Servetus threatened to confuse the doctrine of the Trinity and destroy the faith and life of the church. The reason why Calvin saw Servetus as so dangerous becomes clear in light of the fully Trinitarian structure of Calvin's theology.

### **Knowing the true God**

Calvin's *Institutes* are about 'religion', by which he means faith 'joined with an earnest fear of God', 'willing reverence' and 'legitimate worship' (*Inst.* 1.2.2), that is a true knowledge of God. To describe true religion Calvin lays out what we know about God and describes how we come to know God. He does not strictly separate these two aspects—they are too closely intertwined. The content of our knowledge of God fits precisely with the way in which God reveals himself, and both of these are reflected in the doctrine of the Trinity. To help make the point that Calvin's view of God and how we come to know him are both thoroughly Trinitarian, I will separate them in a way he doesn't.

### **The true God we know**

According to Calvin, simply as creatures, without taking redemption into consideration, we should know God and have 'that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces' (*Inst.* 1.2.1). Does he mean that we should know the Triune God? This question has been vigorously debated and the discussion touches on the structure of Calvin's thought. One view is

that Calvin thinks of two different forms of the knowledge of God (*duplex cognitio Dei*), which can be teased out from each other. In this view Calvin emphasises that humans as creatures can, to some extent, acknowledge God and the duty we owe. To be sure, it is recognised that for Calvin, human creatures are always sinners and stand guilty and condemned before God. Yet, according to this interpretation, Calvin envisages some possibility of knowledge of God directly from creation. ‘Calvin is arguing that anyone, by intelligent and rational reflection upon the created order, should be able to arrive at the idea of God.’<sup>1</sup> For thinkers in this line Calvin introduces the doctrine of the Trinity as a further element in the knowledge of God in light of redemption in Christ.

The other view, which is better supported by the evidence, is that Calvin never thinks of God apart from Christ, and so he sees him as the Triune God. Niesel declares that for Calvin, ‘what we describe as God apart from the Biblical revelation in Jesus Christ is nothing but an idol’ for ‘we find God nowhere else but in the Mediator’.<sup>2</sup> Calvin acknowledges a natural revelation, but accuses the natural person of always turning this revelation into an occasion for idolatry: ‘after we rashly grasp a conception of some sort of divinity, straightway we fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh, and corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God’ (*Inst.* 1.5.11). Sin means that ‘natural’ knowledge of God is not true knowledge of God. The rest of this chapter shows how fully Calvin holds that knowledge of God is given in Christ by the Spirit, and therefore is always Trinitarian. The proposal that balances two different forms of the knowledge of God misses the focus of his theology.

Calvin’s view that true knowledge of God must be Trinitarian becomes clear in his exposition of knowledge of God, for which Exodus 34:6–7 is the key text. In it the two-fold proclamation of God’s name—‘the Lord, the Lord’—shows God’s ‘eternity and his self-existence’ while the rest of the text expresses God’s dealing

- 
1. AE McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 153.
  2. W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 51.

with his creatures—‘kindness, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth’. Calvin contrasts this revelation of God with idolatry, which is never merely a matter of images. The condemnation of idolatry calls us to honour the true God and ensure ‘that nothing belonging to his divinity is ... transferred to another’ (*Inst.* 1.12.1). How do we know the identity of the true God against idolatrous rivals? On the one hand, a recognition of God’s ‘infinite and spiritual essence’ should dispel all false views, whether from popular superstition or sophisticated philosophy. God’s essential attributes set him apart from false conceptions of God. Yet an abstract description of God is not sufficient. If we seek to know God only according to his essence we have ‘only the bare and empty name of God’ which will ‘flit about in our brains’. Calvin turns to the doctrine of the Trinity and announces that God reveals himself as the true God and distinguishes himself from all idols as the one God in three persons: ‘he so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons’ (*Inst.* 1.13.1–2). Only the doctrine of the Trinity can integrate both sides of the Exodus 34 text and show that God is the sovereign, transcendent, infinite God and the God of mercy and love.

### **How we know the true God**

How then do we come to know the true God? Calvin’s general answer is ‘Scripture’. The substance of revelation conveyed by Scripture is God’s self-revelation in Christ by the Spirit. Calvin’s summary statement is that ‘we must be drawn by the Spirit to be aroused to seek Christ; so, in turn, we must be warned that the invisible Father is to be sought solely in this image’ (*Inst.* 3.2.1). The work by which we come to know God in Christ can be viewed in three phases: God redeems his people, enables their response and gathers them in his Church.

### **The Triune economy of redemption**

Calvin’s theology reaches its Trinitarian heights in explaining the work of redemption. He stresses that redemption requires a mediator who is fully God and human. It had be God himself who

was the mediator and came to us because ‘it was not in our power to ascend to him’ and yet we needed him. So it was that ‘our most merciful God, when he willed that we be redeemed, made himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son’ (*Inst.* 2.12.2).

Calvin stresses that the Son comes as Redeemer because of the love of the Father. As he considers the motivation of redemption he states that God is ‘moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace’. He explicitly attributes this love to the Father: ‘by his love God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ’ (*Inst.* 2.16.3).

The work of the incarnate Son is empowered by the work of the Spirit. Calvin revives the ancient pattern of presenting the work of Christ in the threefold office of prophet, priest and king anointed by the Spirit. As prophet, Christ ‘was anointed by the Spirit to be herald and witness of the Father’s grace’. He is King because ‘the Spirit has chosen Christ as his seat, that from him might abundantly flow the heavenly riches of which we are in such need’. In the *Institutes* Calvin does not explicitly relate Christ’s work as priest to the anointing of the Spirit, though he does make much of Christ’s holiness and his consecration to God (*Inst.* 2.15.2–6). Calvin sums up the importance of the work of the Spirit for the work of Christ in the Geneva Catechism, teaching that Christ ‘was filled with the Holy Spirit, and loaded with a perfect abundance of all his gifts, that he may impart them to us’.

### **The Triune economy of response**

Our response to and participation in God’s redemptive work also comes from the work of Father, Son and Spirit. This is most obvious in Calvin’s critique of the controversial Protestant theologian Andreas Osiander (1498–1552). Osiander and Calvin both emphasised the importance of participation in Christ. According to Osiander, participation in Christ means that Christ’s divine righteousness indwells believers, making them personally and inherently righteous. Three elements in Osiander’s doctrine were objectionable to Calvin. One alarming feature was that Osiander rejected the distinction between status and renewal and so

obscured the Reformation doctrine of forensic justification in which believers' status before God is secured outside of themselves. Osiander also bypassed the human nature of Christ and his work in the incarnation, and saw the human nature of Christ as a mere channel through which divine righteousness is delivered to the redeemed. Finally Osiander seemed to posit a direct and unmediated union of the Christ's divine nature with believers.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin's response to Osiander leads his readers through the Trinitarian dynamics of their incorporation into God's redemption. God does not directly share his essence with his creatures. In the Trinitarian economy God retains his transcendent existence and preserves our real humanity. The Son has a particular work: to become incarnate. We receive righteousness from God through his (human) death and resurrection, not through the divine essence channelled to us (*Inst.* 3.11.8-9). The distinct work of the Spirit is to bring us into fellowship with the incarnate, crucified and exalted Son. Osiander proposes 'a gross mingling of Christ with believers' but Calvin recognises a 'mystical union' from a 'spiritual bond' (*Inst.* 3.11.10). The incarnation of the Son and the work of the Spirit is the way in which God unites believers to himself.

This Trinitarian mediation of redemption is the ground for Calvin's careful distinction between justification and restoration. Justification is based in Christ's priestly work in death and resurrection and this becomes ours because we share in Christ by the Spirit. Regeneration (as Calvin terms the restoration of the image of God in sinners) is primarily the work of the Spirit by which we share in the death and resurrection of Christ as our own death to sin and new life oriented towards God (*Inst.* 3.3.5 and 8). The difference may seem to be only a matter of word order: justification is ours on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection through participation in him by the Spirit, while regeneration is ours by participation in the Spirit in Christ's death and resurrection. The difference, though subtle, is in Calvin's view absolutely important.

---

3. T Billings, *Calvin, Participation and the Gift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56-60.

Justification names the objective status of forgiveness of sins and free acceptance, while regeneration names the restoration which comes on the basis of justification. Both come to us through the work of the incarnate Son who binds us to himself by his Spirit, so they cannot be divided from each other or turned against each other. At the same time they relate to the work of the Son and Spirit in different ways. Just as the Son and Spirit are united and distinct, justification and regeneration are not identified with one another but must not be thought of as independent.

### **The Church in Triune fellowship**

For Calvin it is impossible to think of the Triune economy of redemption and response apart from the Church. According to Calvin the response given by the Spirit is only given in and through the Church, which is the mother of believers. He happily echoes Cyprian to declare that those for whom God is Father should have the church as their mother (*Inst.* 4.1.1).

The church exists because of what God has done in his Triune work. Calvin states that the communion of the saints is utterly secure since it ‘stands by God’s election’, has been ‘joined to the steadfastness of Christ’, holds the truth and is given God’s sure promises. This communion exists because ‘all those who, by the kindness of God the Father, through the working of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ, are set apart as God’s property and personal possession’ (*Inst.* 4.1.3). The invisible Church, the spiritual reality which God alone knows directly, is clearly a result of the Trinitarian work of redemption.

The visible Church, ‘the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ’, also exists because of the work of the Father, Son and Spirit (*Inst.* 4.1.7). The visible Church is Christ’s kingdom which he rules by his word, so the marks of the true Church are the preaching of the true word and the observance of the sacraments (which for Calvin are a visible word established by the Word). The word and sacraments are what they are because they come from the love of the Father, though the work of Spirit and Christ is the substance of both.

So the Church in both its visible and invisible aspects is a result of the work of Father, Son and Spirit. Butin summarises:

All that Calvin has said previously in Books I-III about the Trinitarian basis, pattern, and dynamic of God's relationship with human beings becomes incarnate on a human level for us only insofar as by the Spirit, we live and are nurtured by that triune God as members (in the corporeal sense) of Christ, in the womb of the church.<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity is crucial to the structure of Calvin's thought. It is not chosen arbitrarily or merely because it has an aesthetic, rhetorical or instructional value (though it has all three). Calvin's Trinitarian commitment runs far deeper than that. The true God is known only as one God in three persons and the work of God can only be described properly by tracing the united work of Father, Son and Spirit. Yet the connection of redemption and revelation is even more intimate, for the account of redemption is the content of revelation. That is, the true God is revealed and recognised as loving Father, self-giving Son and indwelling Spirit only as he acts to redeem. It is no wonder, then, that Calvin saw Servetus' teaching as a threat to the existence of the Church and the proper glory of God.

### **Trinitarian controversies and Calvin's Trinitarian distinctives**

Given the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the structure of his thought, it is no surprise that Calvin was a tenacious defender of the doctrine. He was involved in a series of disputes because he recognised the vital importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Conversely this recognition grew through the disputes which forced Calvin to spell out his views on the doctrine very carefully and in the process he developed a distinctive position.

---

4. PW Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 99.

Almost 20 years before Servetus was arrested, it was Calvin who was accused of heresy. In 1536 he settled in Geneva and published the first edition of the *Institutes* and Pierre Caroli (1480–c.1545) arrived as professor and preacher in Lausanne. Soon Caroli began advocating prayers for the dead. Pierre Viret (the other leading Reformer in Lausanne) and Calvin responded to Caroli's teaching and he accused them of being Arians.

How could Caroli accuse Calvin of that? Calvin in his first edition of the *Institutes* makes it plain that he holds the Son to be 'one God with the Father, of the same nature and substance or essence ... true God, Creator of heaven and earth'.<sup>5</sup> Caroli based his accusation on the fact that Calvin had not used the terms 'Trinity' or 'person' (a failing Calvin addresses in later editions) and concluded that Calvin rejected the doctrine. In the public disputations which followed, Caroli insisted that Calvin establish his orthodoxy by subscribing to the Creed of Athanasius. Calvin refused. It is likely that he did not want to establish a precedent in which the theology of the Reformation was judged by ancient creeds in place of Scripture and he felt that the catechism he had presented was sufficient testimony to his orthodoxy. Calvin challenged Caroli to repeat the creed in full and he could not, so Calvin pressed the point that the mere repetition of words was not a useful test, but rather the substance of the doctrine taught. He insisted that he held to the same doctrine as all Trinitarian Christians and held to nothing other than the theology of creeds.

In the discussion of the creed Calvin exposed himself to a more substantial accusation from Caroli. He complained that the line in the Nicene Creed which states that the Son is 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God' is a needless repetition of words.<sup>6</sup> He was already sensitive to the fact that this phrase could be used in an Arian sense if the Son's divinity was thought to be

---

5. J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; LCC; Kentucky: Westminster, 1960), 50.

6. BB Warfield, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Calvin and Augustine* (ed. SG Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 206–11.

derived from the Father. That is, the phrase could be taken with the stress on the 'of', so that the Son was derived from the Father. Calvin insisted that the divinity of the Son was underived, and that the Son is 'from' the Father only with respect to his person. He made a similar point in the Genevan catechism by saying that the Son is Jehovah God, that is, he is truly God with the Father but not from the Father. Caroli took this as evidence that Calvin was a Sabellian who failed to distinguish between the persons of the Trinity. Caroli assumed (at least for the sake of accusing Calvin) that 'Jehovah' in the Old Testament is the Father and so to call the Son Jehovah is to say that the Son is the Father. Ironically, this position is almost the reverse of Arianism.

In the aftermath of the debate Calvin wrote a summary for Simon Grynee in Berne. He explains that the title 'Jehovah' affirms God to be self-existent, since it comes from the verb 'to be' in Hebrew and is explained in that sense in Exodus 3. Jehovah is 'I am'. Calvin uses this title of the Son to show that he is fully God in his own right:

If ... the essential quality of the Word be considered, in so far as he is one God with the Father, whatever can be said concerning God may also be applied to him, the second person in the glorious Trinity. Now, what is the meaning of the name Jehovah? What did that answer imply which was spoken to Moses? I AM THAT I AM.

Yet Calvin says that as the Son he is from the Father. This claim that the Son is underived in his divinity but is from the Father in his person first became clear in Calvin's debate with Caroli and remained a distinctive emphasis.

Calvin's orthodoxy was vindicated by the synod in Lausanne and Caroli was dismissed from his position. The episode showed Calvin how disastrous it would be for the emerging Protestant movement if it were to be suspect of heresy in a doctrine as fundamental as the Trinity, or even if it was divided on the matter. He commented that,

this affair has been maliciously, as well as artfully, cooked up by certain individuals, in order to stir up an evil report, and to encourage a bad opinion of us throughout all countries ... we cannot esteem it to be a matter of no great consequence that our adversaries should hear, that we are jangling in debate with one another, and not even agreed upon that most important doctrine of our religion, far more, that the churches should suspect us of such a thing.

The suspicion which Caroli cast on the orthodoxy of Calvin continued to linger. Calvin and Farel had to go to Berne to clear their name before the council. Bullinger, the leader in Zurich and key in Swiss politics, had also to be convinced.<sup>7</sup> It seems likely that the Caroli affair clarified for Calvin the fundamental significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. As he wrote the successive editions of the *Institutes* the section on the Trinity expanded and was clarified, and became central to the presentation of God.

### **Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity**

Calvin's presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the *Institutes* shows the impact of the dispute with Caroli and continued reflection on the issues. Where in the first edition he has avoided some non-biblical terms, now he explains that they can and should be used to make clear the teaching of Scripture. Calvin points out that the term 'homoousios' was needed to show up the heresy of Arius, for only it could draw out the fact that Arians did not fully affirm that the Son is God. Similarly, the term 'person' was needed to unmask Sabellianism. He also recognises that terms were not always used consistently which created some confusion in the early church. What mattered was not the terms but the substance of doctrine which they conveyed and that substance must be drawn from Scripture (*Inst.* 1.13.4–5). Calvin recognised more clearly than he did in 1536 that proper interpretation of Scripture in polemical

---

7. B. Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 74-75.

settings requires the use of other terms and the terms refined by the orthodox theological tradition are best for the purpose.

Calvin explains how he will use the language he has inherited from the church. The ‘essence’ of God is one. There is only one infinite, spiritual incomprehensible being. There is, in the one essence, three persons which are, according to Calvin, distinguished within the one God by incommunicable ‘relations’. That is, Father is the Father only in relation to the Son and Spirit and it is this relation which makes being the Father quite different to what it means to be the Son. There is no sense in which we are invited to know something of the inner existence of the persons— the nature of their existence is hidden from us (*Inst.* 1.13.6). Calvin, typically circumspect, offers no Trinitarian speculation and focuses his account of the nature of the Trinity on what may be known of God from revelation.

Following the principle that God is shown as Triune in his revelation, Calvin traces the evidence for the divinity of the Son and the Spirit by reviewing the biblical presentations of their work in creation and redemption. The closing sentence of Calvin’s argument for the divinity of the Son appeals to Christian experience as it is mediated to us by the biblical gospel: the pious mind recognises God in Christ when it knows that only by him is it ‘quickened, illumined, preserved, justified, and sanctified’ (*Inst.* 1.13.13). Similarly ‘best confirmation’ of the divinity of the Spirit is the familiar experience of the godly, that he not only gives life to all things but gives eternal and incorruptible life to his people (*Inst.* 1.13.14).

When Calvin turns to the unity of God he again draws his evidence from Christian experience established from Scripture. He argues from Ephesians 4:5 where Paul connects one faith and one baptism with one God: ‘if through baptism we are initiated into the faith and religion of one God, we must consider him into whose name we are baptized to be the true God.’ Calvin relates the one baptism into the one faith of the one God to the command to baptise in the name of the Father, Son, and the Spirit, so ‘it is quite clear that in God’s essence reside three persons in whom one God is known’ (*Inst.* 1.13.16).

In dealing with the threeness of God Calvin appeals to the direct biblical descriptions of God and to the historical economy of

God's work to show the distinction of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The Triune God is Creator: the Father creates through the Son. At the same time it is the Son who is incarnate and dies and rises, not the Father. The evidence of a common work of Father, Son and Spirit which can be attributed in different ways to each leads Calvin to repeat Augustine's observation that the beginning of God's work is attributed to the Father as the 'fountain and wellspring of all things'; 'the wisdom, counsel and the ordered disposition' is attributed to the Son and 'to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity'. This is not to be understood to bring into question the shared eternity of the Son and Spirit with the Father but to observe a proper order in their shared work (*Inst.* 1.13.18).

Calvin relates the order of work in the Trinity to the relationships of origin of the Son and the Spirit. It is on the basis of the order of work that we can say that the Son is from the Father, and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. These distinctions and relations do not compromise the unity of God but display this unity because the Son and Father share the one Spirit and he is their Spirit and so is one with them. This dense discussion leads to the same conclusion Calvin reached in the controversy with Caroli: each person of the Trinity has the whole of divinity. He makes a strong distinction between the Son as God 'from himself' and as Son 'from the Father': 'when we speak simply of the Son without regard to the Father, we well and properly declare him to be of himself; and for this reason we call him the sole beginning. But when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son' (*Inst.* 1.13.19). The Latin term for having something from oneself is *a se* and all classic Christian theology holds to God's aseity, that he is self-existent. Calvin claims the aseity of the Son and the Spirit as God (though Calvin mainly deals with the aseity of the Son).

Calvin's position is controversial. It is only given a brief mention in the *Institutes* and does not form the bulk of his Trinitarian thought. On the other hand it remained a consistent part of his thought and can be traced back at least to the Geneva Catechism statement that the Son is Jehovah. Calvin did not consider his statement novel and claims Augustine and other church Fathers in support. His emphasis on the point may be to counter the ongoing

suspicion that he was Arian, for his claim makes it clear that any mention of the Son as derived from the Father cannot refer to his possession of the divine essence, which he does not have from the Father but from himself.

Many commentators have not noted any significant divergence of Calvin from his Trinitarian heritage. While this may be true in general, the explicit and clear claim about the aseity of the Son is a new note in Trinitarian theology. Ellis observes that Calvin holds to the point 'more consistently (or more stubbornly)' than the tradition.<sup>8</sup> Some have judged that on this point Calvin departs from classic orthodoxy for the worse; others have felt that he made an important break with classic theology and promoted a line of thought which led, in time, to modern social Trinitarian views.<sup>9</sup> In a notable discussion, BB Warfield presented Calvin as offering an important development in and clarification of the traditional view.<sup>10</sup> An assessment of this element of Calvin's theology is beyond the scope of this chapter. It is important to note Calvin's claim but not to treat it as the totality or even the key to his doctrine of the Trinity. Calvin's Trinitarian theology comes from a sweeping biblical presentation of God whom we know as Father, Son and Spirit through the Triune economy.

### **The last meeting with Servetus**

Calvin's colleague, Farel, persuaded him to see Servetus one more time and so he came through the streets toward the gaol. He found Servetus in his cell, dismayed by his fate but unchanged in opinion. Servetus asked for Calvin's pardon and the Reformer assured him that he held no personal hatred of him and turned the plea for mercy back on Servetus: 'Think rather of crying for mercy to God whom you have blasphemed'.

---

8. B Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34.

9. See Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism and the Aseity of the Son*, 4–9 for a survey assessment of Calvin's view.

10. Warfield, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity', 189–284.

Later in the morning Servetus was led from his cell to hear his sentence one more time and then to Champel, a small hill outside the city. He again protested his innocence but would not recant his views. As he was burnt to death he cried out, 'Jesus Christ, Son of the eternal God, have mercy upon me!', refusing still to call Christ 'eternal Son of God'. Bernard Cottret, a recent biographer of Calvin, comments that Servetus' punishment 'was due to the misplacing of a single adjective'.<sup>11</sup>

Calvin has been accused of orchestrating Servetus' trial by Catholic authorities earlier in 1553 as well as his arrest and trial in Geneva, of arranging green wood for execution and delighting in the increased agony Servetus endured. None of this is true. Calvin did not seek the conflict with the Spaniard, he did not look for him in Geneva, he sought to convince him to adopt an orthodox view, the other cities called for the death penalty which the council imposed and Calvin asked the council to use a more humane form of execution. He was not Servetus' lone antagonist as some mythology makes him. Calvin would have rejected Cottret's view that the case was simply a matter of a slight linguistic variation. He recognised a pressing danger in Servetus' teaching. That is why he wrote a volume against Servetus the next year and continued to discuss him in the final edition of the *Institutes* which was published at the end of the decade. The truth of Christian faith should not be defended by the criminal prosecution of heretics, let alone by executions. Calvin's support of the action did not help the Reformed cause or his own reputation. Notwithstanding the problematic execution, Calvin was right to see that undoing the doctrine of the Trinity would destroy the Christian faith.

---

11. B. Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2000), 225.