

**PREPARATION**

This is a long chapter – 27 sections. The sections are arranged in groups, by theme. Please insert the themes:

Section 1: Perils of this topic: point of view established

Sections 2 – 9: Critical discussion of opinions on free will given by philosophers and theologians

Sections 10 & 11: We must abandon all self-approbation

Sections 12 – 17: Man's natural endowments not wholly extinguished: the understanding

Sections 18 – 21: But spiritual discernment is wholly lost until we are regenerated

Sections 22 – 25: Sin is distinct from ignorance (vs Plato), but may be occasioned by delusion

Sections 26 – 27: Man's inability to will the good

**EXPLORATORY**

1. Still dealing with the subject of knowing ourselves, Calvin identifies *two precipices* (255, 20) that we need to beware of. What are they? (255, 13ff & 17ff)

- a. Adopting low or even zero expectations of ourselves: *When man is denied all uprightness, he immediately takes occasion for complacency from that fact; and, because he is said to have no ability to pursue righteousness on his own, he holds all such pursuit to be of no consequence, as if it did not pertain to him at all.*
- b. Adopting a view of ourselves that gives us some space to be independent of God: *Nothing, however slight, can be credited to man without depriving God of his honour, and without man himself falling into ruin through brazen confidence.*

How important is it, in a practical sense, that we avoid both of these errors? What will be the outcome if we fall in either direction? (255, 22)

- a. *...crashing on these rocks*

Pause for thought here: Do we know professing Christians who have toppled over one or other of these precipices? Have we fallen down one of them ourselves? In what sense

How do we steer a safe course between the two? (255, 21ff)

- a. By being *...taught that no good thing remains in (our) power, and that (we) are hedged about on all sides by most miserable necessity, and, in spite of this (we) should nevertheless be instructed to aspire to a good of which (we are) empty, to a freedom of which (we have) been deprived.*

What does Calvin hope this instruction will achieve? (255, 26ff)

- a. We *...may thus be more sharply aroused from inactivity than if it were supposed that (we were) endowed with the highest virtues.*

How do people react to the two safeguards Calvin has identified in 255, 21ff? (255, 27ff)

- a. *Everyone sees how necessary this second point is.*
- b. *...too many persons have doubts about the first point.*

As we might expect, Calvin is anxious that such unhelpful doubts should not be permitted to linger.

(Beveridge translates 255, 30ff in this way: *For it being admitted as incontrovertible that man is not to be denied any thing that is truly his own, it ought also to be admitted, that he is to be deprived of everything like false boasting.* This seems to bring out the parallelism in the sentence better than Battles' translation.)

How do we know that, *At the time when man was distinguished with the noblest marks of honour through God's beneficence, not even then was he permitted to boast about himself?* (256, 4ff)

- a. *At that time, I say, when he had been advanced to the highest degree of honour, Scripture attributed nothing else to him than that he had been created in the image of God [Gen 1:27], thus suggesting that man was blessed, not because of his own good actions, but by participation in God.*

Now that God's image has been defaced in us, what two things should we do? (256, 9ff)

- a. *What, therefore, now remains for man, bare and destitute of all glory, but to recognise God for whose beneficence he could not be grateful when he abounded with the riches of his grace; and at least, by confessing his own poverty, to glorify him in whom he did not previously glory in recognition of his own blessings?*

What dangers arise if we think of ourselves as able to produce, unaided, wisdom and virtue? (256, 17ff)

- a. *When we are taught to wage our own war, we are but borne aloft on a reed stick, only to fall as soon as it breaks! Yet we flatter our strength unduly when we compare it even to a reed stick!*

*...some, while they hear that man's power is rooted out from its very foundations that God's power may be built up in man, bitterly loathe this whole disputation as dangerous, not to say superfluous.* Does Calvin share their view? (256, 28f)

- a. *Definitely not - it appears both fundamental in religion and most profitable to us*

2. In this section Calvin sets out a view that he regards as wrong and, on a practical level, unhelpful. According to this view what is located in the mind? (257, 3)

- a. *...the reason*

What functions do Calvin's opponents ascribe to reason? (257, 3ff)

- a. *...reason:*
  - i. *...like a lamp illumines all counsels*
  - ii. *...like a queen governs the will*

What, according to this erroneous view, is the source of reason's illumination? (257, 5f)

- a. *...it is suffused with divine light to take the most effective counsel*

Why is the reason superior to the will? (257, 6f)

- a. *...it excels in power to wield the most effective command*

Again on the wrong view that Calvin is opposing, what is there in man that opposes reason? (257, 8)

- a. *...sense perception*

What word would we use nowadays to mean the same as 'sense perception'?

- a. *Sensuality*

How is sense perception distinguished from reason? (257, 8ff)

- a. *It:*
  - i. *...is gripped by torpor and dimness of sight*

- ii. *...always creeps along the ground*
- iii. *...is entangled in baser things*
- iv. *...never rises up to true discernment*

What sits between reason and sense perception? (257, 10f)

- a. *...the appetite*

The appetite can become either will or lust. How does it become will? (257, 10ff)

- a. *...the appetite, if it undertakes to obey the reason and does not permit itself to be subjected to the senses, is borne along to the pursuit of virtues, holds the right way, and it moulded into will.*

How does it become lust? (257, 13ff)

- a. *...if it subjects itself to the bondage of the senses, it is so corrupted and perverted by the latter as to degenerate into lust.*

In the view of the philosophers that Calvin is describing, are our wills bound or free? (257, 26ff)

- a. *...they locate the will midway between reason and sense. That is, it possesses right and freedom of itself wither to obey reason or to prostitute itself to be ravished by sense – whichever it pleases.*

3. What concession to reality do the philosophers that Calvin is critiquing make? (257, 29ff, 35ff)

- a. *Sometimes, convinced by experience itself, they do not deny the great difficulty with which man establishes the rule of reason a kingdom within himself.*
- b. *Accordingly, Cicero says that the faint glimmer given us by nature is soon quenched by our wicked opinions and evil customs. The philosophers concede that such diseases, once they have occupied men's minds, rage so violently that no one can easily restrain them*

What are the chief points of disagreement that Calvin has with the philosophers? (258, 8f, 24ff)

- a. *...the philosophers hold as certain that virtues and vices are in our power.*
- b. *...reason which abides in human understanding is a sufficient guide for right conduct; the will, being subject to it, is indeed incited by the senses to evil things, but since the will has free choice, it cannot be hindered from following reason as its leader in all things.*

What inclines the philosophers to think that virtues and vices are in our power? (258, 9ff)

- a. *They say: If to do this or that depends upon our choice, so also does not to do it. Again, if not to do it, so also to do it. Now we seem to do what we do, and to shun what we shun, by free choice. Therefore, if we do any good thing when we please, we can also not do it; if we do any evil, we can also shun it.*

4. Despite that fact that, *all ecclesiastical writers have recognised both that the soundness of reason in man is gravely wounded through sin, and that the will has been very much enslaved by evil desires*, Calvin accuses the early Church fathers of coming, *far too close to the philosophers*, and elevating human powers. What two reasons does he give for them doing this? (259, 1ff)

- a. *...a frank confession of man's powerlessness would have brought upon them the jeers of the philosophers with whom they were in conflict.*
- b. *...they wished to avoid giving fresh occasion for slothfulness to a flesh already indifferent toward good.*

Did the early Church fathers yield completely to the philosophers' views? (259, 8)

- a. They compromised. They *...strove to harmonise the doctrine of scripture halfway with the beliefs of the philosophers.*

What was the early Church fathers' main objective? (259, 10)

- a. *...not to give occasion to slothfulness*

What is Calvin's verdict on their method? (259, 28ff)

- a. *...they credited man with more zeal for virtue than he deserved.*

Calvin gives a brief survey of the development of thought among leading Christian thinkers from the early Church onwards. While acknowledging that there were differences between them, how does he summarise what they have in common? (261, 26f)

- a. *...they teach that the power of free decision resides...in the reason and in the will.*

5. What is Calvin's purpose in this section? (262, 6)

- a. *...briefly to weigh, not to refute... ie, to state the views of others but not to critique them at this stage.*

Those whose views Calvin is 'weighing' categorise our behaviour under two classifications. What are the two classifications? (261, 30f)

- a. *...intermediate things which obviously do not pertain to God's kingdom;*
- b. *...true righteousness* (dependant upon God's special grace and spiritual regeneration).

This leads them to divide the areas in which the will of man operates. What example does Calvin give and in that example, in what areas is our will 'free' and in what areas is it dependant on the grace of God? (262, 1ff)

- a. The example is: Prosper of Aquitaine's, *The calling of the Gentiles.*
- b. The division of the will is into:
  - a. The sensual;
  - b. The psychic;
  - c. The Spiritual.
- c. The first two are completely free, the last requires the grace of God for its operations.

This sort of division tends to restrict theological discussion of matters pertaining to the will to one area only. What area is that? (262, 9f)

- a. *...what promotes obedience to the divine law.*

What areas do they neglect? (262, 8f)

- a. *...they enquire not into its importance for civil or external actions.*

What is Calvin's assessment of this method? (262, 10ff)

- a. ***It concentrates on the main question but overall is inadequate.***

Into what three divisions was the concept of freedom commonly divided?

- a. Freedom from necessity – this naturally inheres in man and is therefore incapable of being lost. It has survived the fall.
- b. Freedom from sin. Lost through sin.
- c. Freedom from misery. Lost through sin.

Please remember, all Calvin set out to do in this section was *describe* the various views. He promises to engage with them later in the Institutes.

6. As Calvin turns to what has been taught about grace, what question does he tell us is still unanswered? (263, 1ff)

a. *...it has not yet been demonstrated whether man has been wholly deprived of all power to do good, or still has some power, though meagre and weak; a power, indeed, that can do nothing of itself, but with the help of grace also does its part.*

What is Calvin's objection to the answers given to this question by, *the sounder schoolmen*, initially and then by, *the Sophists*? (263, 17ff)

a. *...they grant free will to man.*

In what specific way do they do this? (263, whole page, and the top of 264)

a. They introduce a distinction between desiring to do good and doing it. At some level the desire is wholly human, even if it requires the grace of God to be effective.

7. Why do people such as the, *Schoolmen*, feel it necessary to assert that in at least some areas man's will is free? (264, 5f)

a. *...because he acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion.*

Calvin does not disagree with this (*Well put, indeed...*) but he disagrees with the conclusion that is drawn from it, *ie* that our wills are free.

What problems arise from the use of the term, *free will*? (264, 14ff)

a. People misinterpret it to mean not just the absence of external compulsion but the freedom to choose between evil and good.

What is the source of this misinterpretation? (264, 19)

b. *Man's disposition, which, voluntarily so inclines to falsehood that he more quickly derives error from one word than truth from a wordy discourse.*

What does the history of theological thought and teaching demonstrate? (264, 21ff)

a. As the ages have gone by this subject has been developed in such a way that almost all who have written/taught about it, *have been carried off into ruinous self-assurance.*

8. Augustine is described as being, *angry*, with those who deny the freedom of the will. Why was he angry? (265, 6f)

a. Because their motive in asserting the bondage of the will is not the glory of God but to excuse sin.

9. What conclusion does Calvin arrive at about his predecessors who were fundamentally orthodox? (267, 16ff)

a. Their language was inconsistent but, correctly, their main emphasis was on man's inability to please God without personally experiencing regeneration and the indwelling of God's Spirit.

10. What does Calvin tell us, at the end of section 9, that he is now turning to? (267, 20f)

a. *...a simple explanation of the truth concerning the nature of man.*

What must we bear in mind in order to prevent our becoming demoralised and depressed by the knowledge of our utter wretchedness, calamity, poverty, nakedness and disgrace? (267, 27f)

- a. That, *in God must be recouped*, what we ourselves lack.

What tendency in ourselves should we regard as being more dangerous than the tendency to overemphasise our faults and failings? (267, 28ff)

- a. The tendency to lose ourselves in vain confidence and usurp God's honour, *thus becoming guilty of monstrous sacrilege*.

Taking human experience, as recorded in scripture, as our guide, who, apart from ourselves, fosters this tendency to vain confidence in us? (268, 1ff)

- a. Satan

What is Satan, in relation to us? (268, 6)

- a. Our enemy.

11. What, for Calvin, is the first precept of the Christian religion? (269, 2)

- a. Humility.

What is the second? (269, 2)

- a. Humility.

What is the third? (269, 2)

- a. Humility.

What is the difference between humility and merely abstaining from pride and arrogance? (269, 3ff)

- a. Abstaining from pride and arrogance implies that we think we have something to be proud of. True humility arises from the recognition that we have nothing to be proud of, only characteristics to be ashamed of.

Calvin's requirement (269, 29) of us is uncompromising. What is it and what does he distinguish it from in order to help us understand it more precisely? (269, 29ff and 26ff)

- a. The requirement is that we recognise ourselves to be what we see ourselves to be in the *faithful mirror of scripture* – those who have no cause to be proud at all but only to be ashamed.
- b. He distinguishes this from us choosing not to dwell on those things of which we *might* be proud, if we were so inclined.

Why is this a requirement? (269, 25f)

- a. *...the (sincere and genuine) confession of our humility has a ready remedy in his mercy.*

12. In the first paragraph, the faculties that we were given at creation are classified under two categories. What are the two categories? (270, 5f)

- a. *...natural gifts*
- b. *...supernatural gifts*

As a result of the fall, what has happened to our natural gifts? (270, 5f)

- a. *...the natural gifts were corrupted*

What is the effect of the fall on man's natural gifts? (270, 5, 12ff)

- a. *...the natural gifts were corrupted.*

What was the effect of the fall on our supernatural gifts? (270, 6, 12ff)

- a. *...his supernatural gifts were stripped from him*

- b. *...he is so banished from the Kingdom of God that all qualities belonging to the blessed life of the soul have been extinguished in him, until he recovers them through the grace of regeneration.*

For what purpose were we originally endowed with supernatural gifts? (270, 10ff)

- a. *...spiritual gifts, with which he had been furnished for the hope of eternal salvation.*

What supernatural gifts were stripped away by the fall? (270, 15ff)

- a. *...faith*
- b. *...love of God*
- c. *...charity toward neighbour*
- d. *...zeal for holiness and for righteousness*

(Calvin describes the above qualities as 'adventitious', which means they exist in us as a result of external factors, not by nature.)

On what basis does Calvin regard these gifts as *beyond nature*? (270,17)

- a. *Christ restores them in us*

In what does the corruption of the natural gifts consist? (270, 19ff)

- a. *...soundness of mind and uprightness of heart were withdrawn at the same time. This is the corruption of the natural gifts*
- b. *...something of understanding and judgment remains as a residue along with the will, yet we shall not call a mind whole and sound that is both weak and plunged into deep darkness.*
- c. *...depravity of the will is all too well known.*

Why has our reason not been completely wiped out? (270, 26ff)

- a. *...reason...is a natural gift*

How do we know that our reason's current condition is, *partly weakened and partly corrupted, so that its misshapen ruins appear*? (270, 30f)

- a. *John speaks in this sense: "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not."*

Why did the will not perish at the fall? (271, 1)

- a. *...because it is inseparable from man's nature*

What did happen to the will at the fall? (271, 2f)

- a. *It, was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right.*

What aspect of our corrupted faculties is Calvin going to deal with first of all? (271, 5ff)

- a. *...so that the order of discussion may proceed according to our original division of man's soul into understanding and will, let us first of all examine the power of the understanding.*

(The theme of the understanding continues to occupy Calvin through to the end of section 24. Section 25 opens with, *Now we must examine the will...*)

If we adopt the view that human understanding is now so blinded as to leave it no perception of any object whatsoever we run into two problems. What are they? (271, 10f)

- a. We:

- i. *...go against God's word*
- ii. *...run counter to the experience of common sense*

What does experience teach us? (271, 11f)

- a. *...we see implanted in human nature some sort of desire to search out the truth*

Why do we have this desire to search out the truth? (271, 12f)

- a. Because we have *already savoured it*

What happens to our longing for truth (271, 17f, 24ff)

- a. *...this longing for truth languishes before it enters upon its race because it soon falls into vanity*
- b. *Then it grievously labours under another sort of vanity: often it cannot discern those things which it ought to exert itself to know. For this reason, in investigating empty and worthless things, it torments itself in its absurd curiosity, while it carelessly pays little or no attention to matters that it should particularly understand. Indeed, it scarcely ever seriously applies itself to the study of them.*

Does the Bible offer any support for this scathing view of human reason? (271, 32ff)

- a. *Solomon, through the whole of Ecclesiastes, after recounting all those studies in which men seem to themselves to be very wise, declares them to be vain and trifling [chs. 1:2, 14; 2:11 etc.]*

13. Section 12 concludes with the observation that our minds tend to become fascinated with things that have no spiritual value and significance, paying little or no attention to matters that it should particularly understand. However, that does not mean, as far as Calvin is concerned, that the mind has lost all its powers and effectiveness. *...its efforts do not always become so worthless as to have no effect, especially when it turns its attention to things below.*

As we have already seen (cf. Q&A based on 271, 10f, above) Calvin does not feel that human reason has lost all its usefulness, especially in relation to earthly things. In this section he goes even further than that. How so? (271, 37)

- a. *On the contrary, it is intelligent enough to taste something of things above, although it is more careless about investigating these.*

Why is it that when it comes to, *things above*, that the mind does not carry out its investigative activity the same skill as it employs when investigating, *the present life*. (272, 3ff)

- a. *...when the mind is borne above the level of the present life, it is especially convinced of its own frailty.*

Calvin therefore feels it is necessary to draw a distinction between those things human minds feel equal to and those things it is reluctant to engage with. What distinction does he draw? (272, 7ff)

- a. *...there is one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly.*

What characterises, *earthly things*? (272, 9ff)

- a. *They...do not pertain to God or his Kingdom, to true justice, or to the blessedness of the future life; but which have their significance and relationship with regard to the present life and are, in a sense, confined within its bounds.*

What does the classification, *earthly things*, include? (272, 15ff)

- a. *...government, household management, all mechanical skills, and the liberal arts.*

What characterises, *heavenly things*? (272, 16ff )

- a. *They relate to...the knowledge of God and of his will, and the rule by which we conform our lives to it.*

What is the fundamental driver of our engagement with earthly things? (272, 19f)

- a. *...since man is by nature a social animal, he tends through natural instinct to foster and preserve society.*

How does he do this? (272, 21ff)

- a. *...there exist in all men's minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order.*

How do these universal impressions show themselves? (272, 23ff)

- a. *...no man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws.*
- b. *Hence arises that unvarying consent of all nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws.*

Why do people so readily accept these principles? (272, 27f)

- a. *...their seeds have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men.*

Calvin is not unaware of, *the dissensions and conflicts that immediately spring up*. He identifies two types of such dissensions and conflicts. Which of the two is the most common? (272, 32f)

- a. *Others think unjust what some have sanctioned as just...and contend that what some have forbidden is praiseworthy.*

Which of the two is less common? (272, 30ff)

- a. *Some, like thieves and robbers, desire to overturn all law and right, to break all legal restraints, to let their lust alone masquerade as law.*

Why do, *such persons hate laws*? (272, 34ff)

- a. *Such persons hate laws not because they do not know them to be good and holy; but raging with headlong lust, they fight against manifest reason. What they approve of in their understanding they hate on account of their lust.*

Why is it that the existence of such folk does not nullify what has been said already by Calvin about men and women having a natural inclination to accept the need for laws and to devise them? (273, 1ff)

- a. *...while men dispute among themselves about individual sections of the law, they agree on the general conception of equity*
- b. *...some seed of political order has been implanted in all men*

What two things are proved, in Calvin's view, by the above observations? (273, 3ff)

- a. *...the frailty of the human mind is surely proved: even when it seems to follow the way, it limps and staggers*
- b. *...in the arrangements of this life no man is without the light of reason.*

14. What comes after government in the list of, *earthly things*? (273, 9)

- a. *...the arts both liberal and manual*

When it comes to, *the arts, both liberal and mechanical*, Calvin asserts that, *all of us have a certain aptitude*, and that, *hardly anyone is to be found who does not manifest talent in some art*. What power does this display? (273, 9f)

- a. *...the power of human acuteness*

The fact that we are surrounded by, *energy and ability not only to learn but also to devise something new in each art or to perfect and polish what one has learned from a predecessor*, means that, *with good reason we are compelled to confess* – what? (273, 19)

- a. *...its beginning is inborn in human nature*

Whence the, *universal apprehension of reason and understanding*? (273, 21)

- a. *It is, by nature implanted in men*

What ought everyone to recognise, from the universality of these gifts and abilities? (273, 23)

- a. *...the peculiar grace of God*

What work of God should arouse our gratitude? (273, 23ff)

- a. *The creator of (everybody's) nature himself abundantly arouses this gratitude in us when he creates, people with learning difficulties.*

What do such people show us? (273, 25f)

- a. *...the endowments that the human soul would enjoy unpervaded by his light.*

Some abilities are possessed only by relatively few people. What are they? (273, 28f)

- a. *...the discovery or systematic transmission of the arts, or the inner and more excellent knowledge of them*

What qualifies this heightened level of ability to be thought of as 'natural'? (273, 31f)

- a. *...it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious*

## 15. How does Calvin summarise the present state of the human mind? (273, 35f)

- a. *...fallen and perverted from its wholeness*
- b. *...clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts*

How is Calvin able to see God at work in situations in which even those directly involved do not recognise him? (273, 37ff)

- a. *If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.*

In whom and in what activities does Calvin feel we should recognise the work of the Holy Spirit? (274, 4ff)

- a. *...the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity*
- b. *...the philosophers...in their fine observation and artful description of nature*
- c. *...those men...who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably*
- d. *...they...who developed medicine*
- e. *...the mathematical sciences*

What do we see in these and many more human abilities and achievements? (275, 1f)

- a. *...how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.*

16. What scriptural support does Calvin find for his view that all abilities are derived ultimately from the Spirit of God? (275, 5ff)

- a. *The understanding and knowledge of Bezalel and Oholiab, needed to construct the Tabernacle, had to be instilled in them by the Spirit of God [Ex 31:2-11; 35:30-35].*

Given this scriptural teaching, Calvin finds it little wonder that even, *the pagan poets...confessed that the gods had invented philosophy, laws, and all useful arts.* (274, 18f)

Romans 8:9 says: *But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.* How does Calvin counter the suggestion that this means that the Spirit of Christ and unbelievers cannot possibly have any relationship? (275, 12ff)

- a. *We ought to understand the statement that the Spirit of God dwells only in believers [Rom 8:9] as referring to the Spirit of sanctification through whom we are consecrated as temples to God [1 Cor 3:16]. Nonetheless he fills, moves and quickens all thing by the power of the same Spirit, and does so according to the character that he bestowed upon each kind by the law of creation.*

What does this arrangement teach us about God's will? (275, 18ff)

- a. *...the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly*

What responsibility does the availability of such help place upon us? (275, 20ff)

- a. *...let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gifts freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.*

Does this mean that great understanding indicates that the possessor of must know God and be blessed by him? (275, 25ff)

- a. *...this capacity to understand, with the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory think in God's sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it.*

Why is it the case that eminence in the use of God's gifts does not necessarily imply a close relationship with God? (275, 29ff)

- a. *...as the free gifts were withdrawn from man after the Fall, so the natural ones remaining were corrupted...to defiled man these gifts were no longer pure, and from them he could derive no praise at all.*

17. What are the key elements of the summary Calvin gives in this section? (276, 1ff)

- a. *...reason is proper to our nature; it distinguishes us from brute beasts, just as they by possessing feeling differ from inanimate things.*
- b. *The presence in society of those who are from birth mentally challenged, does not obscure the general grace of God. Rather it should warn us to, ascribe what is left in us to God's kindness...if he had not spared us, our fall would have entailed the destruction of our whole nature.*

- c. *In...variety God commends his grace to us, lest anyone should claim as his own what flowed from the sheer bounty of God.*
- d. *...why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God's special grace (see footnote 64) , which, in passing many by, declares itself bound to none?*
- e. *Besides this, God inspires special activities, in accordance with each man's calling.*
- f. *...experience shows that, when those who were once especially ingenious and skilled are struck dumb, men's minds are in God's hand and under his will.*
- g. *...we see in...diversity some remaining traces of the image of God, which distinguish the entire human race from the other creatures.*

18. Please note from the way this section starts that we are now transitioning from the *capabilities* of human reason, the corruption caused by the Fall notwithstanding, to the *limits* of fallen human reason when it comes to God's kingdom and to spiritual insight.

Spiritual insight consists of three things. What are they? (277, 16ff)

- a. *Knowing God;*
- b. *Knowing his fatherly favour in our behalf, in which our salvation consists;*
- c. *Knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law.*

How does Calvin regard, *the greatest geniuses*, when it comes to spiritual insight's first two aspects, especially the second? (277, 20)

- a. *...blinder than moles*

The philosophers are capable of – what? (277, 21f)

- a. *...competent and apt statements about God here and there*

What mars these statements, where they do occur? (277, 22f)

- a. *...a certain giddy imagination*

God gave the philosophers, *a slight taste of his divinity*, and sometimes, *impelled them to make certain utterances by the confession of which they would themselves be corrected*. Why did he do this? (277, 24f)

- a. *...that they might not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance*

How does Calvin *illustrate* the manner in which the philosophers saw truth? (277, 29ff)

- a. *They are like a traveller passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightning flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step – let alone be directed on his way by its help.*

How does he *describe* the way in which the philosophers saw truth? (277, 17ff)

- a. *...they saw things in such a way that their seeing did not direct them to the truth, much less enable them to attain it!*

Why was it that, despite their best efforts, they could only manage to, *sprinkle their books with droplets of truth*? (277, 35ff)

- a. *...they never even sensed that assurance of God's benevolence toward us (without which man's understanding can only be filled with boundless confusion).*

19. Sections 19 & 20 deal with the first aspect of spiritual insight, knowing God. Unaided human reason does not advance us a single millimetre towards this.

Calvin compares our, *false opinion of our own insight*, to intoxication. Nonetheless he wants to demonstrate the truth. What does he feel will be the most effective way to do this? (278, 6ff)

- a. *...it will be more effective, I believe, to prove this fact by Scriptural testimonies than by reasons.*

Which Scriptural testimonies does he employ? (278, 8ff)

- a. John 1:4-5, *"Life was in God from the beginning and that life was the light of men; this light shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not."*
- b. John 1:13 *...those believers who embrace Christ are "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*
- c. Matt 16:17, *As Christ testified, the fact that Peter recognised him was a special revelation of the Father.*

What does John 1:4-5 teach us about the souls of men and women? (278, 12ff)

- a. *...man's soul is so illumined by the brightness of God's light as never to be without some slight flame or at least a spark of it.*

Why do our souls, even with this illumination...not comprehend God? (278, 15ff)

- a. *Because man's keenness of mind is mere blindness as far as the knowledge of God is concerned.*

How do we know this is true? (278, 17)

- a. *...the Spirit calls men "darkness"*

What does John 1:13 mean? (278, 21ff)

- a. *Flesh is not capable of such lofty wisdom as to conceive God and what is God's, unless it be illumined by the Spirit of God.*

20. How many passages of Scripture does Calvin refer to in this section, all of which teach that spiritual insight is only present to the extent that God gives it to us? (278, 25ff)

- a. eighteen

Taking the teaching of these passages together, along with Calvin's explanations of their meaning, how does Calvin assess the thought that unaided human wisdom is sufficient to enable us to, *penetrate to God and to the secret places of the Kingdom of Heaven*? (280, 18)

- a. *...madness!*

21. The previous section dwelt on our *inability* to understand spiritual truth in a saving way. This section looks at the same thing from another angle – that God does enable people to know the gospel and believe it.

What do we need in order to be saved? (280, 25 & 29)

- a. *...new revelation*
- b. *...to know (our) own calling*

(We may have come across Pelagius before but just in case: Pelagius was born around 354 in Britain, or Brittany, and last appears in history in 418. His condemnation as a heretic means that his books did not survive so we tend only to know about his writings from those who opposed him.)

The heresies for which he was condemned included teaching that people are capable of responding to the gospel and of obeying God's law without any involvement from God in the process. People are not spiritually dead as a result of the fall. They are only sick and are capable of recognising and embracing the gospel cure for their sickness.)

How does Calvin counter the Pelagian claim that all people need to turn to God is knowledge of his law? (280, 33ff)

- a. *David had the Law in which was comprised all wisdom that can be desired; yet not content with it, he asks that his eyes be opened to "contemplate the mysteries of His law" [Ps 119:18]*

What instruction, given by Jesus to his apostles, teaches us that we need the Holy Spirit before we can understand what we need to understand in order to serve them? (281, 3ff)

- a. *...the apostles were properly and fully taught by the best of teachers (ie Jesus). Yet if they had not needed the Spirit of truth to instruct their minds in this very doctrine which they had heard before [John 14:26], he would not have bidden them to wait for him [Acts 1:4].*

22. Which aspect of spiritual insight does Calvin turn to in this section? (281, 13f)

- a. *...the third aspect of spiritual insight, that of knowing the rule for the right conduct of life. This we correctly call the "knowledge of the works of righteousness."*

In what way does this aspect of spiritual insight differ from the other two? (281, 15ff)

- a. *The human mind sometimes seems more acute in this than in higher things. For the apostle testifies: "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do the works of the law, they are a law to themselves...and show the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their thoughts accuse them among themselves or excuse them before God's judgment" [Rom 2:14-15].*

What follows from the observation that, the Gentiles by nature have law righteousness engraved upon their minds? (281, 23f)

- a. *...we surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life.*

In Romans 2:14-15, the passage quoted above, of which law is the Holy Spirit speaking? (281, 26)

- a. *...natural law*

How does Calvin define natural law? (282, 5ff)

- a. *This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.*

Let's think about how Calvin arrives at that definition and, in the process, gain a fuller understanding of what he means by it. Is it usual or unusual for people to accept that there are standards by which behaviour is judged? (281, 25f)

- a. *There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law.*

Is widespread submission to the place of law in our lives a gift from God? (281, 28f)

- a. *...men have been **endowed** with this knowledge of the law*

This enables Calvin to speak of, *the purpose*, behind such an endowment, which purpose he now wants to investigate. All people have law. The Jews have God's revealed law. What do gentiles have? (282, 2f)

- a. *...for them conscience stands in place of law*

Paul is not saying in this passage that the conscience informs us about what is right and wrong in precisely the same way as God's law does. Often, people's consciences do not trouble them about things that God's law condemns. Paul's point is that even where that is the case, the fact remains that people have a conscience which at least establishes in them the notion of right and wrong. It is also the case that, unless we have damaged our conscience by repeatedly going against it, we all have to acknowledge that, judged even by our own consciences, we have done wrong. Why is that important? (281, 33ff)

- a. *Because it might seem absurd that the Gentiles perish without any preceding judgment, Paul immediately adds that for them conscience stands in place of law;*

The existence of conscience means that the condemnation of the gentiles is – what? (282, 3)

- a. *...just*

What does the natural person do with the voice of conscience? (282, 9ff & 16f)

- a. *Man is so indulgent toward himself that when he commits evil he readily averts his mind, as much as he can, from the feeling of sin.*
- b. *The sinner tries to evade his innate power to judge between good and evil.*

Mention is made here of Plato's view that the only sin is ignorance. For a helpful analysis of Plato's position and its implications for society, read

<http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/10/platos-big-mistake-knowledge-is-virtue.html><http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/10/platos-big-mistake-knowledge-is-virtue.html>

God disagrees with Plato, as Calvin points out, because in God's sight our own minds are the source of the evil that we live out in our lives, 282, 13ff.

Does our, *innate power to judge between good and evil*, leave us untroubled if we ignore it? (282, 17ff)

- a. *The sinner tries to evade his innate power to judge between good and evil. Still, he is continually drawn back to it, and is not so much as permitted to wink at it without being forced, whether he will or not, at times to open his eyes.*

23. What observation does Themistius (cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Themistius>) make about human conduct that Calvin approves of? (282, 21ff)

- a. *...the intellect is very rarely deceived in general definition or in the essence of the thing: but that it is illusory when it goes farther, that is, applies the principle to particular cases.*

What two examples of people forgetting the general principle that they have just laid down does Calvin produce? (282, 24ff)

- a. *Murder – every man will affirm that murder is evil. But he who is plotting the death of an enemy contemplates murder as something good.*

- b. Adultery – *The adulterer will condemn adultery in general, but will privately flatter himself in his own adultery.*

Going further than Themistius (with Calvin's approval) Aristotle observes that sometimes people do what they know to be wrong, even at the time they do it, Aristotle identifies two underlying attitudes in the guilty. What are they and how are they defined? (283, 2ff)

- a. Incontinence. Being borne along by the passion of the moment and later feeling ashamed: *"Where incontinence reigns the disturbed mental state or passion so deprives the mind of particular knowledge that it cannot mark the evil in its own misdeed which it generally discerns in like instances; when the perturbation subsides, repentance straightway returns."*
- b. Intemperance. A commitment to an unregulated life that is not later accompanied by shame and repentance: *"Intemperance, however, is not extinguished or shattered by the awareness of sin, but on the contrary, stubbornly persists in choosing its habitual evil."*

24. For what purpose has the natural law and the conscience been given? (283, 14f)

- a. *...solely that they (ie. we) should not pretend ignorance as an excuse.*

Does this mean that our consciences will always agree with God's law? (283, 15ff)

- a. *...it is not at all a necessary consequence that truth should be discerned in individual instances.*

What, then, is necessary? (283, 17ff)

- a. *It is more than enough if their understanding extends so far that evasion becomes impossible for them, and they, convicted by the witness of their own conscience, begin even now to tremble before God's judgment seat.*

At this point it appears to me that Calvin may appear to digresses slightly, turning to the evaluation of the achievements of conscience – but he is doing this to reinforce his original point, that unaided human reason never attains to true spiritual insight.

*If we want to measure our reason by God's law, the pattern of perfect righteousness, what do we find?* (283, 22)

- a. *...in how many respects it is blind!*

How does Calvin demonstrate this blindness? (283, 22ff)

- a. *Surely it does not at all comply with the principal points of the First Table; such as putting our faith in God, giving due praise for his excellence and righteousness, calling upon his name, and truly keeping the Sabbath [Ex 20:3-17]. What soul, relying on natural perception, ever had an inkling that the lawful worship of God consists in these and like matters?*

When the unregenerate set out to worship God, what do they bring him? (283, 30)

- a. *...empty trifles*

How do they react when made aware by God's word of the errors of their ways? (283, 29f & 284, 2ff)

- a. *...even if they be called away a hundred times from their empty trifles, they always slip back into them once more.*

- b. *...they could never be persuaded that what the law prescribes concerning worship is the truth.*

Why does the natural law encourage us to conform to the second table of God's law when it in no way at all inclines us to conform to the first? (284, 7f)

- a. *...because these (commands) are more closely concerned with the preservation of civil society among them.*

However, even with regard to the second table, people pick and choose what is important to them. What examples of this tendency does Calvin give? (284, 9ff)

- a. Refusal to accept another's authority: *A man of most excellent disposition finds it utterly senseless to bear an unjust and excessively imperious domination, if only he can in some way throw it off.*
- b. Vengeance: *Nor do the philosophers consider the avenging of injuries to be a vice*

Leaving the particular requirements of the first and second tables of the law to one side, what other matter do we overlook? (284, 18f)

- a. *...in all our keeping of the law we quite fail to take our concupiscence into account.*  
(Concupiscence = powerful drives, lusts.)

*...the natural man refuses to be led to recognise the diseases of his lusts.* How does Calvin demonstrate the truth of this statement? (284, 21ff)

- a. *While the philosophers label the immoderate incitements of the mind as "vices," they have reference to those which are outward and manifested by grosser signs. They take no account of the evil desires that gently tickle the mind.*

25. Having dealt with the position of those who ascribe all sin to ignorance, Calvin now turns to the opposite extreme – that all sins are traceable directly to deliberate malice and depravity. What does he think of this view? (284, 27ff)

- a. *...so ought we to repudiate the opinion of those who suppose that there is deliberate malice and depravity in all sins.*

Why should we repudiate this view? (284, 30ff)

- a. *...often we fall despite our good intentions. Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deceptions, is subject to so many errors, dashes against so many obstacles, is caught in so many difficulties that it is far from directing us aright.*

Turning again to his fundamental point that our unaided reason does not attain to spiritual insight, Calvin quotes 2 Corinthians 3:5 to demonstrate – what? (284, 37ff)

- a. *Paul...even takes from us the ability to think how the right doing of anything can enter our minds.*

What is Calvin's response to those who say this is going too far? (285, 4ff)

- a. *...to the Holy Spirit who "knows that all the thoughts of the wise are futile" [1 Cor 3:20; cf Ps 94:11] and who clearly declares that "every imagination of the human heart is solely evil" [Gen 6:5; 8:21] it seems most fitting. If whatever our nature conceives, instigates, undertakes, and attempts is always evil, how can that which is pleasing to God, to whom holiness and righteousness alone are acceptable, even enter our minds?*

Even believers cannot rely on their renewed reason but must ask God to give the understanding that we need before we can truly grasp the meaning of his words. In Psalm 119, *David...prayed to be given understanding to learn the Lord's commandments rightly [Ps 119:34]. In desiring to obtain a new understanding he intimates that his own nature is insufficient.* What do we observe in Psalm 119 that teaches us the greatness of this necessity? (285, 12ff)

- a. *...not once, but almost ten times in a single psalm he repeats the same prayer...By this repetition he suggests how great is the necessity that compels him to pray thus.*

Was this necessity something that was experienced by David alone or is it common to all believers? (285, 19ff)

- a. *...what David seeks for himself alone, Paul is accustomed to implore for the churches in common, "We ceased not to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding in order that you may walk worthily before God," etc [Col 1:9-10; cf Phil 1:9].*

What is the implication of Paul's representing the granting of spiritual wisdom and understanding as a benefit of God? (285, 26f)

- a. *...he bears witness at the same time that it has not been placed within man's ability.*

How importantly did Augustine view God's grace of illumination? (285, 29f)

- a. *...no less necessary for our minds than the light of the sun for our eyes.*

What is the difference, in Augustine's view between our physical eyes and the eyes of our minds? (285, 31ff)

- a. *...we ourselves open our eyes to behold the light, but the eyes of the mind, unless the Lord open them, remain closed.*

Is 'the grace of illumination' something that we are given for all of our lives at our conversion or is it something that even the Christian continually needs afresh? (285, 33ff)

- a. *Nor does Scripture teach that our minds are illumined only on one day and that they may thereafter see of themselves*

What evidence does Calvin produce to support this view? (285, 35ff)

- a. *...what I have just quoted from Paul has reference to continuing progress and increase. David has aptly expressed it in these words: "With my whole heart I have sought thee; let me not wander from thy commandments!" [Ps 119:10]*
- b. *David...confesses that he needs continual direction at every moment, lest he decline from the knowledge with which he has been endowed.*

## 26. Please note footnote 82

To what subject does Calvin turn in this section? (286, 5)

- a. *Now we must examine the will*

*The philosophers teach that all things seek good through a natural instinct, and this view is received with general consent. Why may we, not suppose this doctrine to have anything to do with the uprightness of the human will?* (286, 12ff)

- a. *...the power of free choice is not to be sought in such an appetite, which arises from inclination of nature rather than from deliberation of mind.*

- b. *...if you consider the character of this natural desire of good in man, you will find that he has it in common with animals. For they also desire their own well-being.*
- c. *...man does not choose by reason and pursue with zeal what is truly good for himself according to the excellence of his immortal nature; nor does he use his reason in deliberation or bend his mind to it. Rather, like an animal he follows the inclination of his nature, without reason, without deliberation.*

How does the will that we exercise in the pursuit of our well-being, in the same way as animals do, differ from free will? (286, 14ff & 19f)

- a. *...free will is active only when the reason considers alternative possibilities...the object of the appetite must be amenable to choice, and deliberation must go before to open the way to choice.*
- b. *This instead is required: that he discern good by right reason; that knowing it he choose it; that having chosen it he follow it.*

What, then is Calvin's conclusion about our natural impulse to seek well-being? (286, 27f)

- a. *...whether or not man is impelled to seek after good by an impulse of nature has no bearing upon freedom of the will.*

Having established that our wills are not free, what remains to be examined? (287, 5ff)

- a. *...we must now examine whether in other respects the will is so deeply vitiated and corrupted in its every part that it can beget nothing but evil; or whether it retains any portion unimpaired, from which good desires may be born.*

27. This section is taken up with the question of whether there is in us any will to do what is good in God's sight prior to his Holy Spirit taking up residence in us.

Certain early Church fathers, notably Origen, followed by others who were respected in Calvin's day, misunderstood Romans 7:15ff. What false conclusion did they draw from these verses? (287, 11ff; 288, 7ff)

- a. *...there is a faculty in the soul voluntarily to aspire to good, but one too feeble to be able to come forth into firm intention, or to arouse effort.*
- b. *...men have, apart from grace, some impulses (however puny) toward good*

Does Calvin agree with them? If not, how does he understand this passage? (287, 20f & 21f)

- b. *...they wrongly pervert the whole argument that Paul is pursuing here. For he is discussing the Christian struggle (more briefly touched in Galatians [5:17]), which believers constantly feel in themselves in the conflict between flesh and spirit.*

How can Calvin be so sure? (287, 24f; 288, 3ff)

- a. *...the Spirit comes not from nature but from regeneration.*
- b. *...it is clear that apostle is speaking of these regenerated, because when he had said that no good dwelt in him, he adds the explanation that he is referring to his flesh [Rom 7:18]*

What is Paul telling us about himself when he says, very explicitly, *In me, that is, in my flesh*? (286, 31ff)

- a. *It is as if he were speaking in this way: "Good does not dwell in me of myself, for nothing good is to be found in my flesh"*

In Calvin's view, who can offer the excuse for sin that Paul offered in Romans 7:20: *I myself do not do evil, but sin that dwells in me?* (287, 34ff)

- a. *This excuse applies only to the regenerate who tend toward good with the chief part of their soul.*

We have seen that the view of Origen and others (including, at one time in his life, Augustine) is that the will of the unregenerate person has some inclination to doing what is right in God's sight. What Biblical doctrines and verses does Calvin produce to counter this? (288, 9ff)

- a. *...what shall we reply to the apostle who even denies that we are capable of conceiving anything [2 Cor 3:5]?*
- b. *What shall we reply to the Lord, who through Moses declares that every imagination of man's heart is only evil [Gen 8:21]?*
- c. *...let us value Christ's saying: "Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin" [John 8:34]. We are all sinners by nature; therefore we are held under the yoke of sin.*
- d. *Paul's saying would not make sense, that "it is God who is at work to will in us" [Phil 2:13], if any will preceded the grace of the Spirit.*

Some say that for God to work savingly in an individual there must first be 'preparation'. What is Calvin's view of this? (288, 21f)

- a. *Away then with all that "preparation" which many babble about!*

Those who advocate 'preparationism' use verses in which believers, such as David, ask God to incline their hearts to obedience to God's law as proof texts for their position. What is Calvin's response to this? (288, 25)

- a. *...we must also note that this desire to pray comes from God.*

How does Calvin support his view from Psalm 51? (288, 26ff)

- a. *When he desires that a clean heart be created in himself [Ps 51:10], surely he does not credit himself with the beginning of its creation.*

### **FOR REFLECTION**

1. Why are questions about the freedom of the will so important?
2. It has become fashionable in our day to think of the Kingdom of God as embracing all aspects of life. Yet Calvin, in section 13, seems to adopt a much narrower definition, speaking of, *earthly things* as not pertaining to God or his kingdom. Is there a conflict between these two positions? If so, which do you think is correct and, more importantly, why?
3. How should Calvin's assertions in this chapter, about what man is and is not capable of understanding, shape our evangelism?
4. Sections 22ff. Does the teaching in these sections give us any guidance as to how people's consciences can be recruited in our attempts to reason with them about the gospel?