

On Knowing God: The World and the Word

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*But now . . . you have come to know God,
or rather to be known by God. (Gal. 4:9)*

ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING claims that the Bible makes is found in the first half of Galatians 4:9: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” Paul makes a claim here, and he makes it on behalf of all the Christians in the Galatian churches. He says, “You have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” Now, that claim can be made on behalf of every true Christian in every

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age and in every place. And what a tremendous thing that is to be able to say! To know God is the promise of the gospel. To know God is the supreme gift of God's grace.

A Scriptural Promise

This, of course, was the burden and the quintessence of Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34). What would happen when the new covenant came? Why, all people included in that gracious covenant would *know God*. Recall the prophet's words: "For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD" (v. 34).

We see the same idea when we witness our Lord praying to his Father in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." And the claim is echoed by John in his first letter: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).

God is telling us that we can know him. We can know him—the One who is real. The One who will deliver us from illusion to know the One who, in truth, is a strong tower and a real rock to those who trust in him. Yes, this is what we were made for, and this is what we were redeemed for.

We might take the thought further and say that the perfection of the knowledge of God and of his Son Jesus Christ is the sum of the real Christian's ambition and hope. Paul declares just such an ambition, first in Philippians 3:10: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"; and again in

1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Yes, it is man’s highest dignity and it is man’s final fulfillment to know his God and the Son of God, perfectly.

I wonder, do you believe this? Or is what I have been writing mere words on a page? Knowing God is the great theme—indeed, the central and glorious theme—of the Scriptures. Think of it! Through Christ man knows God, or rather is known by God.

Calvin’s “Great Theme”

I remember hearing Dr. R. C. Sproul once say, “Knowledge of God is a key theme in Reformed theology.” This is one of the secrets of its strength. And the first (and in many ways the best) expositor of this great theme is the man who stands as the fountainhead of Reformed theology—that towering man, that great genius—John Calvin. Lest I leave you with the wrong idea of Calvin by speaking of him in those terms, let me add that he was a humble man who, by faith, knew God and was known by God, as you and I may be.

Calvin wrote the classic textbook of Reformed Christianity, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I commend this magnum opus of Calvin to you; it takes a lot to get through it, but it is very much worth it! The *Institutes* went through five editions. And one of the things that one traces as one follows it through the successive editions of the book is the way in which this theme of knowing God expanded as Calvin developed the book. In the first edition (ca. 1536), his only real reference (at least his only explicit reference) to the theme of knowing God

was in the first sentence, in which he declared that the sum of sacred doctrine is just about contained in these two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.¹ From the second edition onward, however, not only did the book open with that same sentence (with one minor change: Calvin substituted the word *wisdom* for *knowledge*), but Calvin gave a full chapter to each of these themes.

When he finally came to cast the *Institutes* into its ultimate form—the fifth edition of 1559, twenty-three years after the first edition—not only did he leave those first two chapters of the first book as they had been since the second edition, but in turn, he actually devoted the *entire first book* of the work to the knowledge of God the Creator and the entire second book to the knowledge of Christ the Redeemer! Thus, the theme of the knowledge of God becomes the overarching theme of the whole of the *Institutes* and the entire concern of the first two books. Incidentally, the third book goes on to the knowledge of the grace of Christ and how to obtain and enjoy it.

Note as well that Calvin's book was not called the *Institutes of Christian Theology* but the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This is really to make the point again that we made above: for Reformed folk there is no gap, no gulf, no change of gears between theology and religion. *Religion* means “godliness.” True theology, as Reformed people understand it, leads straight into godliness; that is what it is for. And Calvin knew that very clearly. That's why he called his book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. And that's why he expounds the knowledge of God and the knowledge of Christ and the knowledge of grace in a practical way as he does.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM, 1960), 35.

Thus, knowing God, for Calvin, meant not the cultivating of theological skill, but the practice of Christian obedience, the practice of Christian religion in the best sense of the term. So in studying this subject of knowing God, we are on to the central and very much practical theme of Christianity, as Calvin and his followers understood it. That is our goal in our study: living out what we know of God and his ways.

What It Means to Know God

What does it mean to speak of knowing God? Let us take the concept, put it under the microscope, and try to analyze it. And in order to get our minds quite clear on this, let me begin by stating four things to prepare the way for the final thing I want to state in addition to these first four.

Knowing God Is More than an Awareness of God

First, knowing God—and let us be clear about this—is more than the natural man’s awareness of God. Now, there is such a thing. If men say that they do not acknowledge God, that does not mean that no inklings of God have ever gotten through to them. Rather, it means that the notions of God that have gotten through to them have been denied by them. So says Paul in the first chapter of Romans; and so says Calvin, who had studied that chapter and listened to what it said.

Calvin has a number of phrases to express this inescapable awareness that the natural man has of the Creator whom he ought to serve and who will call him to account one day. Calvin talks of the *sensus divinitatus*, the “sense of deity.” What is the *sensus divinitatus*? It is a sort of persuasion, the persuasion that

there is a God. Calvin also called it the “seed of religion,” the “inclination to religion,” and the “notion of God.” These are all phrases that he used to express this inescapable awareness that there is a God whom men ought to worship.

To be sure, Calvin doesn’t call this knowledge of God by the same Latin word that he uses for the Christian’s knowledge of God. He calls it *notitia*, or, we might say, *awareness*. And the word that he reserves for the Christian knowledge of God is *cognitia*, or *knowledge* in the whole sense. Nonetheless, he insists that the natural man’s awareness of God is something inescapable. Paraphrasing Calvin, then: “Though he tries to escape it, he cannot.” This is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18–23.

The knowledge of God that the natural man possesses is covenantal knowledge. It is knowledge that involves a personal commitment on both sides. It is knowledge of the covenant God who men know is their God. To paraphrase Martin Luther, religion is a matter of personal pronouns. This means that religion, the Christian religion, is a matter of being able to say, “my God,” “my Lord,” “my Savior,” and of knowing that God says of you, “my child,” “my person.”

Thus, knowledge of God exists in that relationship—and apart from that relationship, there is something less than true and full knowledge of God. Knowledge of God, in the sense of *cognitia*, is more than mere awareness that there is a God. Knowledge of God includes and involves communion with God. It is found only in a covenant relationship in which God is your God and you are his person.

Knowing God Is More than Any Particular Experience

In the second place, knowledge of God is more than any particular experience of God. Now, this may sound shocking

to you, but it is true. Let Calvin teach us. Calvin, like the Bible, came from an era when people were less self-absorbed than we tend to be today. In Calvin's day, people tended to be more concerned about the realities that they experienced than the experiences themselves. We, unhappily, live in an age that is "experience-conscious" and "experience-centered." So we generally jump to the conclusion that the more intense any experience is, the more of God there must be in it.

Now, that isn't so. There are many intense experiences in life, but it would be very foolish to suppose that just because they are intense, they are therefore full of God. And it's even more foolish when people today take drugs and expose themselves to other artificial stimuli in order to intensify their own experiences, believing that in any intense experience God is present. That's not the way it comes. Knowledge of God isn't even to be identified with a conversion experience, although without knowledge of God in the sense in which we're speaking of it, no conversion experience would ever be. But what I want to say here is this: knowing God is something far bigger, far richer, and embracing far more than any particular experience. Within the knowledge of God, experiences come—yes, praise God, they do!—in all kinds of ways: conversion experiences and other experiences in the Christian life.

Knowing God, however, is a matter of the relationship itself. It is being aware of that relationship. Of cultivating that relationship. Of counting on that relationship. Of knowing that that relationship stands even when you've got a headache and a toothache and you feel rotten and your experience is simply one of depression and gloom. Knowing God is more, I say, than any particular experience of God. Do let us get that clear. It is the biggest thing in life to get this second point clear, especially in this day and age: knowing God is more than simply an intense experience.

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Knowing God Is More than Simply Knowing about God

And then, third: knowing God, according to Scripture, according to Calvin, is more than merely knowing *about* God. Although knowledge about God is basic to knowing him, there is something more. Calvin, in fact, was quite clear on what needs to be known about God. In the very first edition of the *Institutes*, he specified four things that need to be known about God. Listen to him:

First, he is infinite wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power and life, so that there is no other wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power and life save in him. And wherever we perceive any of these things they are of him. And the second thing we must know is that all things both in heaven and earth were created to his glory. And the third thing we must know is that he is a righteous judge, sternly punishing those that swerve from his laws and do not entirely perform his will. And fourth, he is mercy and gentleness, receiving kindly the wretched and poor that flee to his clemency and trust themselves to his faithfulness.²

That's the knowledge of God. He's the One in whom all value abides. He is the Creator of all things. He is the Judge of all men, and he is the Giver of all grace. "These are the four things we must know about God," says Calvin. Let all believers add their hearty *Amen* to such sentiments!

But Calvin was the first to insist that there is more to knowing God than simply mastering this description of God and thus knowing about him. All the Reformers were concerned to teach and develop all these four heads of truth about God that Calvin has mentioned. But all the Reformers, with Calvin, were also

2. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.2.

concerned to insist that, however right our structured knowledge of God may be—and the Reformers wanted to see us clear on our knowledge about God—nonetheless, personal knowledge of God goes beyond all that. The knowledge that they sought, and the knowledge to which they directed us, and the knowledge to which Paul directs us, is what modern philosophers would call not knowledge by description only, but knowledge by acquaintance, too.³

Let me illustrate what I mean by this distinction. I can know a great deal about the British Prime Minister, or the American President, but I don't know either of them. I have knowledge by description concerning both, yet I have knowledge by acquaintance in regard to neither. But I have knowledge by acquaintance in relation, say, to my friends and family, whom I know and rejoice to know. You see the difference. And knowledge of God, say the Scriptures, is more than merely knowledge *about* God.

Knowing God, Knowing Ourselves

The fourth and final negative I put in a deliberately paradoxical way: knowing God is more than knowing God. You say, "What do you mean?" I mean this: you cannot know God without coming to know yourself, too. And if you decline to know yourself, as the Scriptures introduce you to yourself, well, then you can never know God as the Scriptures present him.

For how does the Bible introduce us to "us"? By telling us that whereas we thought we were doing pretty well and were pretty fine people on the whole, we are, in truth, poor and blind and naked and wretched in God's sight. We are sinners, and we've been ruined by our sin. Reformed theology has always stressed

3. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), 209–10.

this more perhaps than any other expression of Christianity that the world has ever seen. And it has stressed it both for the sake of being realistic about ourselves and for the sake of true knowledge of God.

You say, “What’s the connection between this and the true knowledge of God?” Why, the connection is just this: God is the One who comes right down to us in our desperate need, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, brings us the mercy and the grace and the help and the new life that we need in order to raise us up again. And the more clearly we understand ourselves and our sin, then the more richly we are able to understand the glory of God’s grace. How right was Calvin when he said that the sum of our wisdom is comprehended in the knowledge of God and of ourselves.⁴ And Calvin went on to say, “The two go together.” That is the point I’m trying to make.

So knowing God is more than knowing God. There’s a sense in which God is incomprehensible to us, “in his essence,” as Calvin used to say. In the mystery of the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit, eternally blessed in their fellowship together, God is incomprehensible. In the mystery of all his deep thoughts and of all his plans for world history, he is just beyond our grasp; in that sense, he is incomprehensible to us. He is too “big,” as it were, for us to wrap our minds around.

But, to paraphrase Calvin again, in the knowledge of God that the Scriptures talk about, the point is not that our minds have comprehended the great and, indeed, incomprehensible deity. Rather, the point is that we as sinners who know ourselves and our need have come to know the God who is infinitely gracious. We have come to know him whose mercy avails to meet all our needs and to make our ruined humanity new again.

4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

That's what the knowing of God is all about; it is knowing God in Christ as a Savior.

The Knowledge of God: Apprehension, Application, Adoration

Positively stated, then, let me say this. You ask what the knowledge of God is, as Reformed people understand it, as the Scriptures present it. Well, I'll give you a formula for it. *Knowledge of God is apprehension plus application plus adoration.* It is apprehending God as he discloses himself in the gospel of Christ. It is applying the promise of the gospel to our lives. And it is adoring the God who has thus come to us and become our God and our Savior. Let Calvin put it in his way: "The knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what benefits us and makes for his glory; what, in short, brings profit."⁵ Calvin means, then, that in knowing God, we grasp his grace. "Nor shall we say, but God strictly speaking is known, where there is no religion or godliness," he says again.⁶ There it is: apprehension, application, and adoration. There's religion or godliness. Or again, Calvin says, "We are called to a knowledge of God, which doesn't just flit about in the brain content with empty speculation, but which, if we rightly grasp it and it takes root in our hearts, will be solid and fruitful."⁷ And again, another quote: "Knowledge of God is not identified with cold speculation, but it brings with it worship of him."⁸

5. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

6. Ibid.

7. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9.

8. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.2.

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The total notion of knowing God, which emerges in Calvin's *Institutes*, includes all this: acknowledging God as he reveals himself in Scripture; giving him honor and thanks for all things; humbling oneself before him as a needy sinner and learning of him as he speaks of salvation; believing on the Christ whom he sets forth as our Savior; then loving the Father and the Son with a love that answers the love that they have shown to us; living by faith in the promises of mercy that are given us in Christ; cherishing the hope of resurrection; obeying God's law; and seeking his glory in all relationships and all commerce with created things. So, you see, knowledge of God thus embraces both true theology and true religion: apprehension, application, adoration of God as he comes to us in Christ.

Knowing God through the Bible

But how is God to be known? What are the means of knowing God? Now, the usual Reformed answer to that question has been to say that the knowledge of God depends on God's revelation of himself. Yet I believe that the thrust of this confession will be clearer and more vivid to our minds if, in place of *revelation*, we substitute (just for a moment) the word *communication*.

Why do I suggest this substitution? It seems to me that the word *revelation* might suggest no more than the general display of something that is there to be inspected, if you like. When a monument is unveiled, the statue is revealed and then you can go and admire it. You don't have to, but it's there for you to go and inspect if you want to. I believe that the word *revelation* doesn't always signify to people's minds more than this; it is not as good a word as the word *communication* for conveying what,

as scriptural Christians, we should be concerned to say about the way that knowledge of God comes. That word *communication*, it seems to me, has all the right vibrations. It conveys the thoughts of someone, in this case God approaching us, telling us something, presenting himself to us, asking us for our attention, actually giving us something. The word *communicate* naturally suggests all that.

And that is what God does. Remember, as Scripture reveals the human situation, it is showing us that man—and that means us—is made for loving fellowship with God. Actually, man apart from God is in a state of having turned his back on God, having turned away from God through sin, being set character-wise in the shape of the first sin that Adam and Eve committed in the garden. And what does man do in sin? Why, he does what Adam and Eve did. He plays God. He behaves as if he were the center of the universe and everything were there for him. Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation to be wise and to know good and evil without reference to God. They didn't want to depend on God anymore; that was the heart of their original sin: man plays God, and in playing God he has to fight God. He has to defy God. He has to deny God's claim on him. He has to say to God, "No, I'll not do what you say. I want to do what I think." And that's been the analysis and nature of sin ever since the garden of Eden.

Well, men and women—all of us—are under the power of sin by nature, alienated from God because of this wretched power. Our backs are turned to God, meaning there is no communication. If someone turns his back to you, that isn't a communication posture, is it? If you have your back turned to someone, it means that you don't want to talk to that person. But that's exactly what man is like in sin: man has his back turned to God. But God the Creator, in his mercy, does not give up on us. He

still wants to have sinful men in fellowship with himself, so though man has ceased to communicate with God, God still communicates with man.

Three Stages of Communication

There is, as I said at the beginning, this general communication of God, this inescapable awareness of God, which comes to all men simply by virtue of being alive in God's world. Men reject it. They claim they don't know God simply because they've suppressed what they do know of God. So general revelation, the heavens declaring the glory of God, the firmament showing his handiwork, the invisible things of the Creator being known from the things that are made, that communication from God to men, produces no results. Men don't respond.

So God does more. What does he do? He gives us special communication. We call it *special revelation*. In this special communication from God, there are three stages. Stage 1 we will call *redemption in history*. By words and works, God makes himself known on the stage of history as the Savior of man. There was a typical salvation of Israel from Egypt. And then there was the great antitype, the final spiritual salvation, the glorious salvation wrought by Jesus Christ. God teaches us here about redemption in history, about redemption for a lost world.

And then comes stage 2 in the process of divine communication, which we will call *records and writing*. God inspires what Calvin called public records of the things that he'd done in history so that all men in every age might know what God had done and so come to benefit from what God had done. And we have those records in the Scriptures. The Bible is God's own interpretive account of what he has done

in history for man's salvation and how it applies to life and how it applies to us.

And then finally comes the third stage in God's process of communication, which we will call *reception by individuals*. Here we are concerned with the work of God the Spirit, taking the Word, opening it to us, and taking us and opening our hearts so that the Word finds entrance. This twofold opening—the opening of the Word and the opening of our hearts so that the Word comes in and we understand it—is what is covered by the New Testament use of the word *reveal*.

Take, for instance, what Jesus said of Simon Peter's confession of Caesarea of Philippi: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). The word *reveal* is used the same way in Galatians 1:15–16: "But . . . he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me."

Now, this is a pregnant verse for Paul. Surely the first thing it means is that on the Damascus road, Paul gained a very specific kind of knowledge about our Lord: the knowledge of who Jesus was, Son of God and Savior, just as the martyr Stephen had said in Paul's presence (see Acts 7:51–8:1). Indeed, Paul had thought it was quite right to stone Stephen, and had actually held the coats of the perpetrators while they stoned him and killed him. But knowledge of that same Jesus now came right into Paul's heart so that he knew it was all true and he couldn't deny it anymore. And God revealed his Son to Paul. Paul understood, and the Word came right in because God opened his heart to let it in.

And thus the Word is received by individuals. God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines in men's hearts to give the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor. 4:6). And thus, with Paul, we come

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to see that Jesus Christ is precisely the person that the New Testament says he is, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. And as we come to know who he is and as we come to respond to him and to all that he is, we know God.

The Centrality of the Bible for the Knowledge of God

Now, in all of this the Bible is crucial; surely you can see that from the way that I put it. For if there were no oracles of God (Paul's phrase for the Scriptures—see Rom. 3:2) to set before us what God has done for the world—for us—on the stage of history, in space and time, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we should never know—we could never know—God and his Christ. So the Bible is crucial, and Calvin in the first book of the *Institutes* underlines this point. He likens the Bible to spectacles, reasoning that we need such an apparatus because we are so shortsighted and have such a vague, fuzzy awareness of God. But when the Scriptures come to us, like spectacles, they clear up what is vague and fuzzy and tell us precisely who God is and what he has done for us. And then we're confronted with the real God, and the knowledge of God becomes a real possibility. It is no longer a fuzzy smudge, but it's something definite, something clear, something that calls us and challenges us.

And Calvin has another image: the image of the schoolmaster. Calvin talks about our ignorance, but Scripture comes to us as our schoolmaster, to be (paraphrasing Calvin here) the rule of our thinking and speaking of God. It comes to us to teach us what we are to think about him and his grace to sinners. It teaches us how we are to speak of him and how we are to trust

him. We are clueless; we need instruction. The Scriptures are given to us to be our schoolmaster for this very reason. We are in a maze; that's a further image that Calvin uses. We are lost in a labyrinth; we just can't find our way out. That's Calvin's picture of sinners wandering lost and aimlessly and helplessly in this dark world. But, says Calvin, the Scriptures guide us out of the maze.

Yes, through the Scriptures, men may know God. Without the Scriptures, men could not know God, so says Calvin; the Scriptures are vital, and surely he's right. The formative, controlling, and crucial principle of Reformed theology is *sola Scriptura*: by Scripture alone is God known. And in Reformed theology, the Bible is thought of as God preaching, God teaching, God speaking—saying in application to us what he said long ago to his people when the Bible was first inspired, and through the same Word giving to us himself and his Son.

Thus, Reformed people turn their backs on speculative theology and they give their minds up to learn from the Scriptures. They thank God for the Scriptures. Not primarily, and ideally not at all, do they use the Scriptures simply as a club for beating other people over the head. To be sure, they do indeed use the Scriptures as a test for checking whether what men say in God's name is true; but first and foremost, Reformed people use the Scriptures as their own guide to life. They thank God for the Scriptures as the supreme and final glorious revelation that God has given. They know no Christ but the Christ of the Scriptures. They have no hope but in the promises of God in the Scriptures.

In closing, let me ask you: is the Bible to you, first and foremost, a gift of God's grace, the light for your feet and the lamp for your path in the darkness in which you are by nature? Let us learn from John Wesley, who was much more of a Calvinist than he knew. Wesley in the preface to his sermons wrote this:

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I am a creature of a day, passing thro' life, as an arrow thro' the air . . . till a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. . . . God himself has condescended to teach the way. . . . He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. . . . I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book. . . . I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights. . . . And what I thus learn, that I teach.⁹

Yes, first and foremost, to a Reformed Christian (which is just a biblical Christian, I think) the Bible will be seen as a supreme gift of grace, the written Word given to us in our darkness, to light the way to the feet of the living Word, Jesus Christ, the Lord. Learn to love your Bibles, Christian friends, not simply as repositories of true propositions, but as the path to the Savior's feet. That is the Reformed way. That is the way to the true knowledge of our God, to whom be praise and glory forever.

9. John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (Leeds: Edward Baines, 1799), vi.