

Flaming Glory – Post 5 – God's Glory in the Cross, According to Calvin

In the last Post, we ended with a quote from John Calvin. He said that “unless people establish their complete happiness in Him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to Him.”¹ In this post we will consider how “a complete happiness in Him,” love for God, and life in God can be obtained? For Calvin, the answer was thoroughly Trinitarian and Christ-centered.

Calvin reasoned that unless Christ is a fully and utterly reliable mediator, people will only shun the presence of God. For, wrote Calvin, “when we contemplate... the glory of God... alone, [it] can produce no other effect than to fill us with despair; so [awesome] is His throne.”² God, however, providing Christ as Mediator, “...adorns the throne with ‘grace,’ and gives it a name which can allure us by its sweetness, as though He had stationed on His throne the banner of ‘grace’ and of His paternal love towards so that there are no reasons why His majesty should drive us away.”³ “Christ... converts a throne of dreadful glory into a throne of grace, as the Apostle teaches that thus we can ‘come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need,’ (Hebrews 4:16).”⁴

Until human beings see in Christ the love of God, and see His goodness displayed in the Son upon the cross, and “until Christ interpose to make our peace,” they will never “perceive

¹ John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Know Press. Louisville KY. p. 40-41. Emphasis mine.

² For a clearer understanding of Calvin’s use of the word “awful” or “awesome” to describe God’s glory as perceived outside of Christ, see 1. 1. 3. The Institutes, and his comments on 1 John 4:10 in his Commentary on the Catholic Epistles. For the fearfulness arises from the contrast of God’s goodness and human sinfulness: “Under the goodness of God he comprehends faith, at the same time not excluding fear; for not only does his majesty compel our reverence, but our own unworthiness also divests us of all pride and confidence, and keeps us in fear” [John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 531].

³ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Hebrews*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 93.

⁴ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 538.

God to be either Father, or the Author of salvation, or propitious in any respect.”⁵ Without Christ and His cross, they will not see God’s glory as it truly is. For, Calvin explained, it is only

...in the cross of Christ... as in a magnificent theater, the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross....⁶

In the cross, the Father, far from being a Ruler or Creator who needed to be coerced into loving, freely loved those He loved in the Son who were innately His enemies. Calvin helpfully explains this in His commentary on 1 John 4...

God freely loved us, – how so? because he loved us before we were born, and also when, through depravity of nature, we had hearts turned away from Him, and influenced by no right and pious feelings . . . who are born so corrupt and depraved, that there is in us as it were an innate hatred to God, so that we desire nothing but what is displeasing to Him, so that all the passions of our flesh carry on continual war with His righteousness....

It was then from God’s goodness alone, as from a fountain, that Christ with all his blessings has come to us. We have salvation in Christ, because our heavenly Father has freely loved us; so when a real and full certainty of divine love towards us is sought for, we must look nowhere else but to Christ.”⁷

⁵ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 33.

⁶ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on John, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 40.

⁷ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 211-212.

It was in this, Calvin said, that the glory of God was to be found – in Christ and His cross. As he understood the cross, the Father “communicates Himself to us in His Son, and offers Himself to be enjoyed in Him,”⁸ and this is apart from any consideration of man’s merit.⁹ It is

...in the Person of Christ the glory of God is visibly manifested to us, or, which is the same thing, we have “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” God would remain far off, concealed from us, were we not irradiated by the brightness of Christ. All that the Father had, He deposited with His only begotten Son, in order that He might manifest Himself in Him, and thus by the communication of blessings express the true image of His glory.¹⁰

Both God’s essence and the Father’s Person are revealed in Christ. Christ is both God and “the express image of the Father’s Person.” In the Person of Christ, we see God’s triune glory, and we see the glory of the Father as the Father. In short, the Father’s glory is revealed in the Person of the Son, and the Person of the Son is known by His relationship with His Father in the Spirit.

Hebrews 1, Calvin wrote, was not saying that the Son is the image of God’s essence, but of His Father’s character. This could not be the case, Calvin argued, because Jesus is God! How

⁸ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 214.

⁹ This Calvin also made clear in his comments on 1 John 4: “Were the prattlings of the Papists entertained, that every one is chosen by God as He foresees him to be worthy of love, this doctrine, that He first loved us, would not stand; for then our love to God would be first in order, though in time posterior. But the Apostle assumes this as an evident truth, taught in Scripture (of which these profane Sophists are ignorant,) that we are born so corrupt and depraved, that there is in us as it were an innate hatred to God, so that we desire nothing but what is displeasing to Him, so that all the passions of our flesh carry on continual war with His righteousness” [John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 211]. Or see Book 3 chapter 22 of *The Institutes*.

¹⁰ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 336.

then could He only be the image of God? No, the author of the Hebrews is making the specific point that we see the goodness of God the Father shining forth in God the Son.

For the essence of God being simple and undivided, and contained in Himself entire, in full perfection, without partition or diminution, it is improper, nay, ridiculous, to call it His express image. But because the Father, though distinguished by His own peculiar properties, has expressed Himself wholly in the Son, He is said with perfect reason to have rendered His Person (hypostasis) manifest in Him. And this aptly accords with what is immediately added – viz. that He is “the brightness of His glory.”¹¹

When, therefore, thou hear that the Son is the brightness of the Father’s glory, think thus with thyself, that the glory of the Father is invisible until it shines forth in Christ, and that He is called the impress of His substance, because the majesty of the Father is hidden until it shows itself impressed as it were on His image. ...God is made known to us in no other way than in Christ: for as to the essence of God, so immense is the brightness that it dazzles our eyes, except it shines on us in Christ.¹²

This was the glory of God in the cross: that God communicates to His elect Himself as a loving Father, a sacrificial Son, and a caring Spirit.

In the cross, propitiation for sin was made that Christ might have His church, and bring her to His Father. In His triumph, “the cross, the symbol of ignominy, had been converted into a triumphal chariot.”¹³ Not only was His triumph one in which “every knee may bow to Him,

¹¹ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 82.

¹² John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Hebrews*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 25-26.

¹³ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 316.

(Philippians 2:10)... [by] a magnificent display of His greatness and power....”¹⁴ In Christ’s triumph, “from the beginning even to the end, His having assumed the form of a servant, humbled Himself, and become obedient to death, even the death of the cross... followed by His ascension”¹⁵ – because of all of that – “the cross will be, as it were, a chariot, by which He shall raise all men, along with Himself, *to His Father*.”¹⁶

Calvin taught that God’s glory is manifested in a more beautiful and full way than anywhere else when, in Jesus’ ascension to the Father with us because of His cross and resurrection, God saves His church.¹⁷ It was how God communicated the essence of His glory.

¹⁴ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on John, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 100.

¹⁵ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 314, 322.

¹⁶ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on John, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 18. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ “God in his infinite goodness chooses to connect our salvation with his glory” [John Calvin (n.d.) *Commentary on Isaiah – Volume 3*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 96].