

CALVIN AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Widely differing views on ways leading to true knowledge of God is at present characteristic of discussions in the sphere of religion. Although Calvin worked in a completely different scene, he has laid down certain principles based on his interpretation of Holy Scripture that may contribute to current theological thought on this issue. In this article his views on true and false religion, non-Christian faiths, the uniqueness of Christ as Mediator and Redeemer, and universalism is discussed from the perspective not only of his *Institutes*, but also of his *Commentaries*, *Tracts* and *Treatises* and *Letters*. His conviction is that careful observation of God's Word leads to the principle of Christ as the only way to God. Any kind of self-invented religion, even though it is the result of an appeal by God's general revelation on the *sensus divinitatis* in mankind, leads to idolatry.

The view that all faiths are so many different ways to come to knowledge of the Divine Being, is not only widespread, but is obviously becoming more popular among people in many different walks of life. Religious freedom is seen by many not only as part and parcel of human rights, but also as contrary to the ideas of those who proclaim the uniqueness of their particular faith for a true relationship with God and for salvation to eternal life. Many people — among them well-known theologians — will certainly find the distinction between true and false religions abhorrent. For those, proselytism and even mission work among people of traditional religions has become improper, offensive and unacceptable.

Du Preez lists a number of reasons why attention should currently be paid to developing a sound theology of religions. He mentions *inter alia* the better knowledge and respect for non-Christian faiths in the Western World; the realisation that religious pluralism is a *fait accompli*; the misgivings about Christianity among some Third World people; the relative decline of Christianity in Europe; a new interest in oriental mysticism among many young people; and the question of whether the Church should indeed continue its mission work among people of other faiths. Factors like these necessitate a *theologia religionum* (Du Preez 1983:129). In this regard John Calvin's view of other religions may be of significant value.

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1. TRUE AND FALSE RELIGION

In the period of the sixteenth century Reformation the distinction between true and false religion was not only common, but contributory to religious persecution. Many martyrs died at the stake for their religious convictions. What they regarded as truth was seen by others as false and misleading. Not only was it the age of the Roman Inquisition, but also among Protestants those believed to have repudiated the truth, were harshly punished.

One must therefore bear in mind the historic setting in which Calvin developed his polemic pronouncements. The real issue at stake for him was the reformation of the Church over against the errors and false guidance of the Roman Catholic Church and to a lesser degree against the Anabaptists. This was indeed so important for him, that he regarded delay in the process of reformation as fatal for the Church (Van der Munnik 1937:13). His references specifically to non-Christian faiths are therefore sporadic and incidental. In his situation he saw the papacy (*papatus*) as the gravest danger for true religion.

Al ziet Calvijn krachtens het verbond Gods, dat in een tijdsbestek van vele eeuwen daar is geweest in Rome principieel iets anders dan de “Joden, Turken en Saracenen”, toch beoordeelt hij deze kerk as valse kerk en de paus als antichrist² (De Vries 1959:35).

He even goes so far as to say that the congregations of a Church that moved away from the true ministry of God’s Word do not differ from the assemblies of the Turks (*Inst.* 4.2.10).

Although Calvin’s main thrust was to expose the errors of the Roman Catholic Church (the papacy), a number of references to other religions and also to paganism is indeed found in his works. Obviously it was his intention — and he certainly saw it as his grave responsibility for the sake of the glory of God — to clearly distinguish between true and false religion. He did not hesitate to state it bluntly. In his sermon on Galatians 3:1-3, for instance, he said:

Behold, the Turks believe that they worship the God that made heaven and earth: Howbeit forasmuch as they refuse our Lord Jesus Christ, they have but an Idol (*ils n’ont qu’une idole*) (Calvin: *Sermons*: Gal 3:1-3; CO L, 460).

- 2 In principle due to God’s covenant Calvin saw Rome as different from “Jews, Turks and Saracenes”, and yet he regarded this Church as a false church and the pope as Antichrist.

In several of his works he addressed this issue. A typical example is to be found in the *Instruction and Confession of Faith used in the Church of Geneva*. This catechism, written in French, came out in 1537 or early in 1538. Although it is never stated explicitly in the document itself, one can agree with Karl Barth that “internal and external evidence leaves us in no doubt that the work was Calvin’s and only Calvin’s” (Barth 1995:272).³ The difference between true and false religion is dealt with in Article 2.41. It is clearly stated that, unlike many people may think, true piety is not to be sought in fear of God. In religion fear leads to the concept of an own god, whereas true piety finds the knowledge of God in himself as he reveals himself as our Lord and Father in Christ (cf. Article 27. In: *OS I*, 393).

Calvin is adamant in his rejection of self-invented religion.

Indeed, vanity joined with pride can be detected in the fact that, in seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation; thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations (*ad vanas speculationes curiose transvolant*). They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption (*Inst.* 1.4.1; *OS III*, 41).

Even those who corrupt true religion, separate themselves from the one and only God. And this is sure to happen, says Calvin, when each is given to his own opinion (*Inst.* 1.5.13).

Calvin signifies his approval with Augustine when he writes that

[A]ll who are estranged from the religion of the one God, however admirable they may be regarded on account of their reputation for virtue, not only deserve no reward but rather punishment, because by the pollution of their hearts they defile God’s good works (*Inst.* 3.14.3).

Those who have no part in Christ, hasten all their lives to destruction and to the judgement of eternal death. Calvin loves the way in which Augustine expressed it: the more strenuously anyone runs who is off the path, the farther he gets from his goal, and the more pitiable he therefore becomes; it is better to limp on the path than to run outside it (*Inst.* 3.14.4).

It is clear that Calvin would in no way have acceded to current notions of an anonymous or latent Christianity present in other faiths.

3 The text is published in *CR* 22, 33ff. (Latin in *CR* 5, 323ff.).

2. THE TURKS AND SARACENES

Apart from paganism and Judaism, Calvin refers only to one none-Christian religion, namely the Turks and Saracenes, that is Islam. One must, however, bear in mind that in many of his writings his reference to the Turks has a political connotation, rather than a religious one. Particularly in his letters he often discusses the Turkish invaders as a threat for Western Europe. Incidentally, the Turkish invasion did have a result, however minute, for Christianity: shortly after Calvin, there lived in Geneva a small colony of converted Turks, to which Monter refer as "Calvinists in turbans" (Monter 1967:443).⁴

In 1937 Jacques Pannier published the results of most interesting research that he has done on Calvin and the Turks. He finds it rather regrettable that Calvin has not studied more thoroughly the doctrine of Muhammad, since he had the Latin translation of the Koran, with commentaries, at his disposal⁵ (Pannier 1937:285). It would have been very interesting to hear his opinion on Mohammedanism (*mahométisme*), and particularly a distinction between the predestination that he taught and the fatalism of the Koran, and also between the merciful God of the Christians and Allah. But Calvin paid more attention to the Turkish invasion on the map of Europe than to the corruptive influence (*l'influence corruptive*) that certain Koran ideas had "sur l'esprit des chrétiens" (Pannier 1937:285).

In the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* published in 1536 there is a very specific reference to the religion of the Turks and Saracenes:

Although by ecclesiastical discipline it is not allowed us to be on a friendly footing to or to have close communion with those who are

4 "Geneva received her Turks as a by-product of her spectacular capture of the Savoyard fort at Versoix on November 7, 1589." They were brought to Geneva as slave-laborers to work on the galleys. In the years 1590 and 1591 at least six of them were baptized after public adjuration (Monter 1967:443-445). Incidentally, in his *Institutes* Calvin made provision for such a situation:

For if a Turk should offer himself for baptism, we could not easily baptize him unless he gave a confession satisfactory to the church (*Inst.* 4.16.24).

5 On peut regretter que Calvin n'ait pas étudié plus à fond la doctrine de Mahomet, puisqu'il avait le Coran traduit en latin, avec commentaires à sa disposition.

Pannier also finds it unfortunate that evidently there was no response of Calvin to a request by Oporin (professor of Greek at the University of Basle) whether he would be willing to cover 6 percent of the 400 florin publishing cost of the Latin translation of the Koran (Pannier 1937:280).

excommunicated, we should, however, in every possible way, through exhortation and teaching, through caring and gentleness, and by our prayers to God, strive for their return to the communion and unity of the church. And not only should they be dealt with in this way, but also Turks and Saracenes and other enemies of the true religion. Let it be far from us to approve of methods by which many people endeavour to drive them back to our faith by depriving them of water and fire and common provisions, when they deny them the service of humanity, and persecute them by sword and weapons⁶ (*Inst.* 1536, ch. II – *De fide*; Calvin 1980: 154).

It is, however, significant that the reference to the Turks and Saracenes and the religious tolerance expressed here, was omitted in all subsequent editions of the *Institutes*. This was at once noticed by one of Calvin's fiercest adversaries, Sebastian Castellio. In his *De haereticis an sint persequendi* (published in 1554 under the pseudonym of Martinus Bellius) and also in his *De haereticis non puniendis* he questioned the reformer's motive — particularly after the Servetus trial and execution. Whatever Castellio's intention was, he identified a problem that needs to be explored.

One can safely assume that the omission of these sentences in subsequent editions were not merely accidental. White identified some arguments that have been advanced with respect to Calvin's text of 1536 and the change in later editions (White 1984:576ff.). The first possibility, also suggested by Castellio, was Calvin's shift from a pastoral to a political role, and his position in Geneva. This, however, is highly improbable, since Calvin excised the particular phrase before his return to Geneva.

A plea for the rights of Turks and Saracenes might conceivably have embarrassed Geneva's first pastor in his struggle with civil or religious opponents; it should scarcely have troubled him in his years of exile on the River Ill (White 1984:577).

- 6 Itaque, tametsi familiarius versari, aut interiorem consuetudinem habere cum excommunicatis, per ecclesiasticam disciplinam non liceat, debemus tamen contendere quibus possumus modis, sive exhortatione ac doctrina, sive clementia ac mansuetudine, sive nostris ad Deum precibus, ut ad meliorem frugem conversi, in societatem ac unitatem ecclesiae se recipiant. Neque ii modo sic tractandi sunt, sed Turcae quoque ac Saraceni, caeterique verae religionis hostes; tantum abest ut probandae sint rationes, quibus eos ad fidem nostram adigere multi hactenus moliti sunt, dum aquae et igni, communibusque elementis illis interdicitur, cum omnia illis humanitatis officia denegant, cum ferro et armis persequuntur (*CO* 1,77).

Another line of thought is that Calvin included the softer approach to the Turks, Saracenes and others because the Protestants suffered no less than these people under the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church. But still it does not explain the omission of these sentences in later editions when the persecution was no less severe.

White states that the problem cannot be solved by appeal to Calvin's bad faith, or to the Turkish question or to the rigours of the Roman Inquisition.

If a solution is to be found, it lies, we would argue, in a consideration of the literary and theological, rather than the psychological and sociological, context of Calvin's writing (White 1984:581).

The particular sentences forms part of a discussion of excommunication in the Church.

It is obvious that in such a context, the reference to Turks, Saracens or other enemies of true religion is little more than an aside; ... the 1539 text while preserving the humane emphasis of the original phrase, allows Calvin to correct what in the 1536 *Institutio* was a mere parenthesis in his argument, and to concentrate on the strictly pastoral and ecclesiastical dimensions of excommunication (White 1984:582f.).

Whatever the reason for Calvin's omission of these sentences in later editions was, there is no indication that he at any time renounced what he stated in the 1536 *Institutes*. On the other hand this does not at all mean that he stood sympathetic to non-Christian faiths. Thus, for instance, he stated:

So today the Turks, although they proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven and earth is God, still, while repudiating Christ, substitute an idol in place of the true God (*Inst.* 2.6.4).

He even saw Islam as God's instrument of judgement upon a faithless Christendom⁷ (Cf. White 1984:584). White concludes that

Calvin's protest against the coercion of non-Christians is no temporary aberration, but reflects a constant element in his thinking – a legacy, perhaps, of the humanistic cult of the merciful prince whose restraint is the true measure of his majesty (White 1984:585).

7 La secte de Mahomet, comme l'Escriture nous enseigne, est une juste vengeance de Dieu pour punir l'ingratitude du monde. Et ilz veulent faire accroire qu'elle est avancée par la disposition des Estoilles! (*CO VII*, 533).

3. JUDAISM

More positive is Calvin's attitude toward Jews and Judaism. Although his approach in his *Ad quaestiones et obiecta iudaei cuiusdam* (CO IX, 653ff.) creates the impression of rejection and a lack of sympathy (Cf. De le Roi 1884-92), generally speaking there is enough evidence of a moderate attitude particularly in his commentaries.⁸ Corvoisier correctly points out that although his language about the Jews is often critical and even derisive, his object is rather to attack the Jewish rejection of Christ and not the historical Jew as such, who led a trapped and pursued existence (Corvoisier 1946:205). There are, however, passages in which he does not shrink from a particularly negative attitude. In his eleventh lecture on the Prophecy of Daniel, for instance, he says:

I have had much conversation with many Jews — I have never seen either a drop of piety or a grain of truth or ingenuousness — nay, I have never found common sense in any Jew⁹ (*Comm. Daniel* 2:44-45; CO XL, 605).

But, although Calvin leaves no doubt about the grave consequences of rejecting Christ, even for the Jew there remains an open door to salvation by conversion to Christ (Cf. Visser 1963; Locher 1967).

One must, however — as Laver suggests — bear in mind that for Calvin the primary subjects (and readers) were other Christians, not Jews, and the primary questions revolve around the nature of Scripture and the church, not Jewish faith and the relationship between the synagogue and the church.

It is in answering *these* interlocutors on *these* issues that Calvin refers to Jews, by and large (Laver 1987:35).

4. AN AWARENESS OF DIVINITY

The idea of a *sensus divinitatis*, that Calvin saw as the seed of religion (*semen religionis*) is frequently broached in his writings. Having religion is characteristic of being human.

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance,

8 Cf. also *Inst.* 4.16.14 and Calvin's commentary on Romans 9-11.

9 Historians have been unable to establish what contacts Calvin was referring to here (Cf. Laver 1987:36).

God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty¹⁰ (*Inst.* 1.3.1).

Calvin elaborates on this:

Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds. Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow¹¹ (*Inst.* 1.3.3)

Even experience shows that God has sown a seed of religion in all men¹² (*Inst.* 1.4.1).

In his exposition of John, chapter 1, Calvin writes:

There are two principal parts of the light which still remains in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all men; next, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences (*Comm.* John 1:5)

To understand God's intention with the *sensus divinitatis*, one has to understand the ultimate goal of His creation, and particularly his intention with mankind. Man was created to glorify God.

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot

- 10 Quendam inesse humanae menti, et quidem naturali instinctu, divinitatis sensum, extra controversiam ponimus: siquidem, nequis ad ignorantiae praetextum confugeret, quamdam sui numinis intelligentiam universis Deus ipse indidit (*OS* III, 37).
- 11 Hoc quidem recte iudicantibus semper constabit, insculptum mentibus humanis esse divinitatis sensum, qui deleri nunquam potest. Imo et naturaliter ingenitam esse omnibus hanc persuasionem, esse aliquem Deum, et penitus infixam esse quasi in ipsis medullis, locuples testis est impiorum contumacia, qui furiose luctando, se tamen extricare e Dei metu nequeunt (*OS* III, 39).
- 12 Sicut autem omnibus inditum esse divinitatus religionis semen experientia testatur (*OS* III, 40).

open their eyes without being compelled to see him.¹³ Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance (*Inst.* 1.5.1)

In his commentary on Romans, chapter 1, Calvin clearly bring the notion of a *sensus divinitatis* in connection with God's general revelation.

He (Paul) plainly testifies here, that God has presented to the minds of all the means of knowing him, having so manifested himself by his works, that they must necessarily see what of themselves they seek not to know — that there is some God; for the world does not by chance exist, nor could it have proceeded from itself. But we must ever bear in mind the degree of knowledge in which they continued; and this appears from what follows (*Comm. Rom* 1:21).

Even though God is invisible, his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures so that the divinity becomes known to us.

Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient (*Comm. Rom* 1:20).

God has given us, throughout the whole framework of this world, clear evidences of his eternal wisdom, goodness, and power; and though he is in himself invisible, he in a manner becomes visible to us in his works.

Correctly then is this world called the mirror of divinity; not that there is sufficient clearness for man to gain a full knowledge of God, by looking at the world, but that he has thus so far revealed himself, that the ignorance of the ungodly is without excuse. Now the faithful, to whom he has given eyes, see sparks of his glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing. The world was no doubt made, that it might be the theatre of the divine glory (*Comm. Hebr* 11:3).

Thus — Calvin says — we conceive that there is a Deity; and then we conclude, that whoever he may be, he ought to be worshipped: but this is exactly where our reason here fails, because it cannot ascertain who or what sort of being God is (*Comm. Rom* 1:20).

13 Necui praeclusus esset ad foelicitatem aditus, non solum hominum mentibus indidit illud quod diximus religionis semen, sed ita se patefecit in toto mundi opificio, ac se quotidie palam offert, ut aperire oculos nequeant quin aspicere eum cogantur (*OS* III, 44f.).

Calvin never had any doubt that God's revelation of true knowledge of Him — and therefore of true religion — was exclusively peculiar to the Christian faith, because only Holy Scripture has normative authority in this regard. This is why Walter Kreck could say that for Calvin the Old and New Testament was the very Word of God; it was in these Scriptures that "die Stimme des lebendigen Gott selbst erklingt" (Kreck 1959:27).

The seed of religion resides in all mankind. Thus general revelation without the correction of God's special revelation in Christ will produce religion, but never the true religion by which God is really known and worshiped.¹⁴

In a sermon on Galatians 4:8-11 Calvin explains the origin of pagan religion:

Now also herewithal we see whereof Idolatry proceedeth, and what is the fountain thereof: namely the want of knowledge of the living God. For we must need have some feeling in ourselves, that there is a God whom we ought to worship, and which is worthy to be honored both of great and small, because we have our life of him. It cannot be so clean wiped out of our mind, but that there shall always be some spark of Religion in us. But yet in the mean season, every man wandereth away in his own foolish conceits, because we understand not what God is, nor can come at him. Truly if we were not corrupted, and our understanding blinded by sin, God would still draw us unto him. ... Therefore till such time as God show himself to us, it is impossible for us to have any true Religion, and we shall always be led with abuses and mere follies. ... That is the point wherein they fail, insomuch that they seek Satan's leasings [*lying*] instead of the truth, and worship Idols instead of the living God, till God have called them to him. ... For the Heathen men did make sacrifice also, and some of them had no Idols, thinking that they offered to God the maker of heaven and earth: and yet whereto did all their Sacrifices serve them, but to their condemnation? For they had overthrown God's order, because they aimed not at our Lord Jesus Christ (Calvin 1998a:374).

14 Du Preez states:

[O]mdat die ontiese en noëtiese aspekte van hierdie (algemene) openbaring weens die sondigheid van die mens nie met mekaar korreleer nie, kan daar van ware godsdiens deur middel van hierdie openbaring nie meer sprake wees nie (Du Preez 1983:133).

He is indeed correct when he states that Calvin's view on God's general revelation can hardly be overestimated in the development of a sound theology of religions (Du Preez 1983:132; cf. Bavinck 1949:117).

People may think that they worship the Supreme Being, but because they do not hold Christ as their Mediator and Head, they possess only a fleeting knowledge of God (*evanida fuit apud eos Dei cognitio*), they do not truly taste his mercy and do not know him as their Father. From this it also came about that they at last lapsed into crass and foul superstitions and betrayed their own ignorance. So today the Turks, although they proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven and earth is God, still, while repudiating Christ, substitute an idol in place of the true God (*Inst.* 2.6.4; *OS* III, 326).

The problem with those who do not know Christ, says Calvin, is that they think that any zeal for religion, however preposterous, is sufficient. But they do not realize that true religion ought to be conformed to God's will as to a universal rule...¹⁵ (*Inst.* 1.4.3) In this way they entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God's glory,

[Y]et that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits¹⁶ (*Inst.* 1.4.4).

No wonder that the reformer came to the conclusion that "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols" (... *hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*, *OS* III, 96).

5. ONLY ONE MEDIATOR AND REDEEMER

There are four biblical passages often quoted to substantiate the conviction that there is but one Mediator and Redeemer for mankind: John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5; and 1 John 5:12. A study of Calvin's commentaries on these passages leaves no doubt as to his view on the uniqueness of Christ. The translator of the *Institutes* in Afrikaans, H. W. Simpson, after thoroughly working through all four volumes and different editions, states categorically that Calvin is consistent in his view, that we can not know God without Christ (Calvin 1988:709).

15 [P]utant enim studium quaecunque religionis, quanlibet praeposterum, satis esse: sed non animadvertunt, veram religionem ad Dei nutum, ceu ad perpetuam regulam, debere conformari (*OS* III,42).

16 Manet tamen semen illud quod revelli a radice nullo modo potest, aliquam esse divinitatem: sed ipsum adeo corruptum, ut non nisi pessimos ex se fructos producat (*OS* III, 44).

In his exposition of Jesus' words in John 14:6 (I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me) he states that whoever obtains Christ, has everything that he needs, but "whoever is not satisfied with Christ alone, strives after something beyond absolute perfection." Christ is the way "by which alone (*qua sola*)"¹⁷ we can become new creatures.

If any man turn aside from Christ, he will do nothing but go astray; if any man do not rest on him, he will feed elsewhere on nothing but wind and vanity; if any man, not satisfied with him alone, wishes to go farther (*si quis ultra eum tendat*), he will find death instead of life.

In this passage also Jesus explicitly told his disciples that no prayers are heard, but through His intercession (*Comm. John 14:6; CO XLVII, 324*).

For, since "God dwells in inaccessible light", Christ must (*necesse est*) become our intermediary. Hence, he calls himself "the light of the world", and elsewhere, "the way, the truth, and the life"; for no one comes to the Father, who is "the fountain of life", except through him (*nisi per ipsum*) because he alone (*solus*) knows the Father, and afterward the believers to whom he wishes to reveal him (*Inst. 3.2.1; OS IV, 7*).

On the words of Peter in Acts 4:12 (Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved) Calvin comments that Christ is the only author of life and the fountain of salvation; and unequivocally "there is salvation in none other save only in Christ." The reformer states categorically that salvation is in Christ alone (*in solo Christo est salus*), "because God hath decreed that it should be so" (*Comm. Acts 4:12; CO XLVIII, 85; cf. Comm. John 4:22*).

In 1 Timothy 2:5 Paul writes: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus". Calvin maintains that this one Mediator through whom we have access to the Father was given

17 Willis-Watkins makes the point that there is a difference between saying we are to look at "Christ only" and to look at "Christ alone". Christ alone is an abstraction ... "Christ to whom we look only" is the Christ accommodated and continually accommodating to our condition.

The Christ only on whom faith focuses is, to use the distinction Calvin used, the "totus Christus" knowing and serving whom is the content of co-membership in his body (Willis-Watkins 1991:81). This view is not well enough substantiated.

[N]ot only to one nation, or to a small number of persons on some particular rank, but to all; because the fruit of the sacrifice, by which he made atonement for sins, extends to all. . . . Not only Jews, but Gentiles also, not only persons of humble rank, but princes also, were redeemed by the death of Christ.

And so that there may be no misunderstanding, he continues:

This is the only key (*haec sola clavis est*) to open for us the gate of the heavenly kingdom, that we may appear in the presence of God with confidence (*Comm. 1 Tim 2:5; CO LII, 270*)

1 John 5:12 reads: “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God, does not have life”. Once again Calvin unambiguously states that

God made life to be in none but in Christ (*non alibi quam in Christo*), that it might be sought in him; but lest any one should turn away to another, he excludes all from the hope of life who seek it not in Christ (*CO LXXXIII, 368*).

Apart from these *loci classici*, there are a number of other biblical passages where Calvin in his exposition dwelt on the uniqueness of Christ as Redeemer and Mediator. In John chapter 17 Jesus prays in his capacity as our Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). His prayer for himself in the first five verses, is at the same time a prayer for his church as Head of the church. Thus his words in verse 3: “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”. For Calvin the reason why He says this is obvious:

[T]hat there is no other way in which God is known but in the face of Jesus Christ (*quia autem non nisi in Christi facie cognoscitur Dei*), who is the bright and lively image of Him (*Comm. John 17:3; CO XLVII, 378*).

Other references of Calvin’s to the one and only salvation is found in his commentaries on John 4:22, on Romans 1:16 and again in his exposition of Romans 5:18:

He makes this favor common to all, because it is propounded to all, and not because it is in reality extended to all; for though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God’s benignity indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive him (*Comm. Rom 5:18; CO XLIX, 101*).

In his commentary on Matthew 12:16 Calvin calls Christ “the appointed Redeemer of the world”; on Matthew 19:14 “the only Redeemer”; on Luke 23:51 “Redeemer to the Jews and to the whole world”. Once again in

his exposition on John 1:11 and on Romans 15:12 Christ is “the Redeemer of the whole world”, and on Acts 26:18 “Christ is the only Redeemer which doth deliver us from the tyranny of Satan.” Christ is also the only Mediator in whom is found “every thing that belongs to eternal life” (*Comm. John* 9:37). God holds out to us “one Mediator only, by whom he is willing to be appeased and reconciled” (*Comm. John* 14:14). On Acts 17:18 Calvin says that our faith is principally distinguished and discerned from the superstitions of the Gentiles, because it sets forth “Christ to be the sole Mediator (*Christum unum mediatorem*); because it teaches us to seek for salvation only at his hands” (*Comm. Acts* 17:18; *CO XLVIII*, 406).

Dealing with the Fall and redemption of mankind in Book 2 of his *Institutes*, Calvin leaves no doubt as to Christ being the only way to God.

Surely, after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation. For Christ not only speaks of his own age, but comprehends all ages when he says: “This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent” (John 17:3, *Inst.* 2.6.1; *OS* III, 320f.).

In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us (*Inst.* 1.2.1).¹⁸

But also in many of his sermons Calvin explicitly proclaimed Christ as only Redeemer and Mediator between God and mankind. In a sermon on the nativity (Luke 2:1-14) he states clearly that the Son of God, who emptied Himself of everything for our salvation “was the Redeemer of the world from all time” (Calvin 1998b:29; *CO XLVI*,15). The *solus Christus* principle is stated even clearer in his sermon on Matthew 26:36-39. He admonished his hearers to

hold fast to our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that in Him alone we must find the full perfection of salvation ... so that we do not run from one side to the other to find mediators (Calvin 1998b:45; *CO XLVI* 833f.).

Preaching on a passage from Peter’s address on the day of Pentecost, Calvin pointed out that the sacrifices which were ordained by God in the old Law were types and shadows to show men how they have access to God by means of a Mediator; but now we have the Mediator “in person, who once for all by His unique Sacrifice (*par son Sacrifice unique*) fulfilled everything”

18 Nam etsi nemo iam in hac humani generis ruina Deum vel patrem, vel salutis auctorem, vel ullo modo propitium sentiet donec ad eum nobis pacificandum medius occurrat Christus (*OS* III,34).

(Calvin 1998b:225; *CO XLVIII*,642). Calvin's conviction of the uniqueness of salvation in Christ was so strong that he did not hesitate to say that

[A]ll such as content not themselves with our Lord Jesus Christ, do utterly renounce all hope of their salvation. For there are not two or three, but only one Mediator (*il n'y a qu'un seul Mediateur*) (Calvin 1998a:297; *CO L*,526).¹⁹

In his sermon on Galatians 3:19-20 he reiterates that Christ is not a mediator for one nation alone, but for the entire whole world (Calvin 1998a:315; *CO L*,533f.).

On the 25th of June, 1539 Calvin wrote a letter of great concern to his former congregation in Geneva, admonishing them to end the quarrels and discord of which he was informed and to accept the integrity of their pastors. He entreated them in the name and strength of the Lord Jesus Christ to turn away their heart and mind from man, and to betake themselves "to that one and only Redeemer (*ad unicum illum redemptorem*)" (*CO X*,354). In another letter, written to Denis Peloquin and Louis de Marsac on August 22, 1553, he formulated the *solus Christus* principle even clearer. These two men occupied the same cell during the last days of their captivity before their execution for not denouncing their reformed faith. He encouraged them to stand firm by referring with approval to the confession of someone else brought to trial for his faith, Michael Girard.²⁰

Being questioned as to whether the Virgin Mary and the saints intercede for us, he answered, that there is but one only intercessor and advocate (*quil ny a quun seul Iesus Christ Intercesseur et advocat*), Jesus Christ; which is true, for there are neither men nor angels who have access to God the Father save by this Mediator alone (*que per ce Mediateur unique*) (*CO XIV*,594).

It should also be noted that for Calvin there was no doubt that the Old Testament too "proclaims Him in the strictest sense as the Mediator between God and man" (Niesel 1980:106).²¹ Thus even before his incarnation Christ was the Redeemer of the elect in the dispensation of the old covenant.

When Jesus Christ was still not revealed in the flesh, He was already the Mediator, and all the patriarchs of old could approach God only

19 Sermon on Galatians 3:15-18.

20 According to a note in the *History of the Martyrs*, this Michael Girard did not persevere.

21 Das Alte Testament weist aber nicht nur irgendwie auf Christus hin, sondern es predigt ihn im strengen Sinne als den Mittler zwischen Gott und den Menschen (Niesel 1938:100).

when they were guided to Him by the Saviour and when the Saviour enabled them to find grace in the presence of God; and they could base their prayers only on the ground that they were pleasing to God because a Saviour was promised to them (CR 41,555).

There is no other sustaining ground of God's promises. "In Him alone God the Father is gracious to us" (CR 50, 22). Wernle points out the reason why Calvin sought the fulfilment of God's promises only in Christ:

Es gibt, meint er, auch allgemeine Verheissungen für alle Menschen, die doch alle ihr Ziel nicht erreichten und keinen festen Glauben in der Menschenseele auslösten. Für ihn steht es einfach ausser Frage, dass "niemand von Gott geliebt wird ohne Christus" (Wernle 1919:223).²²

Taking into account what Calvin said about God's revelation and the mediatorial role of Christ, he left no doubt that only Christianity offers true knowledge of God, redemption and eternal life.

6. FAITH

The Christian faith can hardly be dealt with separately from our belief in the only Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Therefore to add a few remarks of Calvin's on faith as such will be sufficient. Dealing with faith in Article 27 of his *Instruction and Confession of Faith used in the Church of Geneva*, Calvin states very clearly that what we receive through faith can only be in Christ alone (OS I, 393). Indeed, it is true that faith looks to one God. But this must also be added, "To know Jesus Christ whom he has sent." For God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ's splendor had not beamed upon us²³ (Inst. 3.2.1). On the words of Peter and Silas to the jailer in Acts 16:31 ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"), Calvin comments that this is but a short, and, to look to, a cold and hungry definition of salvation, and yet it is perfect to believe in Christ. For Christ alone has all the parts of blessedness and eternal life included in him, which he offers to us by the gospel; and by faith we receive them (Acts 15:9).

- 22 Wernle also makes the interesting remark that Calvin differed from Zwingli on this: "Der Zwinglische Universalismus der Gottesliebe fand by Calvin kein Verständnis mehr" (Wernle 1919:223).
- 23 Verum quidem est in unum Deum fidem respicere: sed illud quoque addendum est, ut agnoscat quem ille misit Iesum Christum. Quia Deus ipse procul absconditus lateret nisi nos irradiaret fulgor Christi (OS IV, 8).

And here we must note two things; first, that Christ is the mark whereat faith must aim; and, therefore, men's minds do nothing else but wander when they turn aside from him (*Comm. Acts* 16:31).

A remark of the Calvin scholar Werner Krusche is relevant here:

Worum es Calvin mit der Behauptung der Unsterblichkeit und der Wachheit der Seel zu tun ist, ist deutlich: es geht um die Unverbrüchlichkeit der Christusgemeinschaft, um die Unzerstörbarkeit der pneumatischen Lebensverbindung mit dem auferstandenen Haupt (Krusche 1957:297).

7. PRAYER

For Calvin reaching God by prayer was only possible through our Mediator and Intercessor, Jesus Christ.

And this is it, wherein we differ from the Painims [*pagans, heathens*] and Infidels. For we see that the Turks and Idolaters do greatly pray unto God. But after what manner pray they? Forsooth [*in truth*] even at all adventure: so that they know not what they do (Calvin, *Sermons on Psalm 119*, sermon 6: vav).

God cannot be called Father except through Christ (*CR* 37,402; 27,700).

There is a remarkable prayer of Calvin with which he concluded his eleventh lecture on the book of the prophet Daniel:

Grant, Almighty God, since thou hast shewn us by so many, such clear and such solid *testimonies*, that we can hope for no other Redeemer than him whom thou hast set forth and as thou hast sanctioned his divine and eternal power by so many miracles, and hast sealed it by both the preaching of the Gospel and the seal of thy Spirit in our hearts, and dost confirm the same by daily *experience*, — *Grant* that we may remain firm and stable in him. May we never decline from him, may our faith never waver, but withstand all the temptations of Satan and may *we* so persevere in the course of thy holy calling, that we may be gathered at length unto that eternal blessedness and perpetual rest which has been obtained for us by the blood of the same, thy Son — Amen. (*Comm. Daniel*, Prayer in Eleventh Lecture).

8. UNIVERSALISM

It is obvious that Calvin would in no way support the idea of salvation without Christ and in the final instance a life of bliss in the hereafter for every living person. On the contrary, he stated unambiguously that there is no such possibility.

Surely, after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation (*OS III*, 320f.).²⁴

To substantiate this belief, he quotes the words of Christ, speaking not only of his own age, but comprehending all ages: "This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent" (John 17:3):

Thus, all the more vile is the stupidity of those persons who open heaven to all the impious and unbelieving without the grace of him whom Scripture commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter into salvation²⁵ (*Inst.* 2.6.1; *OS III*, 320f.).

In the same way Calvin strongly condemned the idea of syncretism and thus of a universal religion. Referring to current rites and ceremonies in the Church of Rome, he says that

they are attempting something ingenious: to shape one religion out of Christianity and Judaism and paganism by sewing patches together. Their unction therefore stinks because it lacks salt, that is, the word of God (*Inst.* 4.19.31).

9. CONCLUSION

Some of the issues that are currently particularly relevant in theology did not have the same urgency for solving on the ecclesiastical scene of the sixteenth century. It stands to reason that Calvin did not address himself to many of the problems that have today become burning issues on the religious, theological and church-related scene. But Calvin laid down some theological principles that can easily be applied to current dilemmas facing church and theology.

24 Certe post lapsum primi hominis nulla ad salutem valuit Dei cognitio absque Mediatore.

25 Quo foedior est eorum socordia, qui caelum profanis et incredulis quibuslibet patefaciunt, absque eius gratia quem Scriptura passim docet unicam esse ianuam qua in salutem ingredimur (*OS III*, 321).

Whether the multi-faith situation in which Christians at present find themselves calls for the development of a sound theology of religions, or whether it needs to be addressed as it presents itself in various forms, the related principles articulated by Calvin should be seriously considered. Similar to his approach to other matters of concern, he developed his views on the uniqueness of salvation in Christ as the only true way to knowing God — and therefore also his views on the position of other faiths — solely on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Accepting Holy Scripture as the *norma normans* for life and doctrine, and by consistently adhering to that rule, he provided future generations with lasting truths.

As far as the focus of this article is concerned, he has left no doubt that careful observation of God's Word leads to the principle of Christ as the only way. The confession of the *solus Christus* follows necessarily on the *sola Scriptura* premise. For Calvin in religion truth is a clear cut matter. Both religion without Christ and a corrupted faith within Christianity are certain ways to destruction. Indeed, God reveals Him to all people through his works in general revelation. But without the correction of the revelation in and by Christ, it leads nowhere. Neither does any kind of self-invented religion, even though it is the result of an appeal by God's general revelation on the *sensus divinitatis* in mankind.

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