John Calvin’s *Sensus Divinitatis* and the Apologetic Task

I. Introduction

*Imagine that you are talking with your friend Ben, a non-Christian with whom you have never really discussed your faith. In the course of conversation, he states that he believes that God is a made up idea and that Christians who strongly affirm that he exists are obnoxious, misguided, and arrogant. How do you respond to this assertion?*

Scripture teaches that not only does God exist, but God has given all men a knowledge of his existence (Romans 1:20). How then, do we respond to assertions such as the one that Ben makes? Has the Fall so corrupted him that he has lost all sense of this knowledge? Should you try to convince him that he knows more than he is willing to admit?

The answers to these questions are informed greatly by the way that we understand the nature of this knowledge of God. The great Reformer John Calvin has developed the idea in a way that has greatly informed this conversation. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin discusses the *sensus divinitatis*, or the knowledge of God which exists in every human heart and renders men without excuse when they deny his existence. Calvin’s purpose in developing the *sensus divinitatis*, or SD, was primarily pastoral; the fact that all men know God and rebel against him should be enough to call Christians to engage passionately in sharing the gospel. This paper will examine how understanding Calvin’s concept of the SD will aid us as we engage unbelievers in discussion about our faith. We will begin by first looking at the concept of the SD in the *Institutes*, then see how this concept has been developed by Reformed Epistemologists, and finally how a Calvinist can use this concept in an apologetic conversation.

II. Calvin’s Understanding of the SD

*Distinctives*

Because Calvin is expounding on a theme in Scripture, the concept of the SD did not originate in his thinking. Other theologians, including Aquinas, have discussed the idea of the knowledge of God and its implications. Calvin, however, drew on and developed these themes to a much greater degree than anyone before him. Oliphint writes, “Calvin was in many ways the champion and theological architect of such a notion. Calvin, however, simply saw himself as following the apostle Paul, particularly, as Paul works out this notion in Romans 1:18-2:17.”¹ Thus, his commentary on the Scriptural account of knowledge of the divine is often viewed as definitive.

Calvin’s heavy reliance on the authority of Scripture allowed him to shape his discussion of the knowledge of God in such a way as to avoid the Classical misunderstanding of rationality. In his exposition of the SD, Calvin breaks from a Platonic understanding of knowledge. Where Plato sees knowledge as belonging solely to the domain of reason, Calvin recognizes that knowledge involves the affections. At the beginning of chapter two of the first book of the Institutes, Calvin states that “we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety.” He later goes on to define piety as “that union of reverence and love to God which knowledge of his benefits inspires.” Thus the knowledge itself consists in part of the right ordering of affections. This understanding of knowledge as more than rationality has allowed the church to develop a more robust Scriptural epistemology as well as shaped the way it does missions: it is not enough for a person to have a rational understanding of the tenets of Christianity; salvific knowledge also involves a radical reordering of the affections.

**Defining the SD**

Unfortunately for scholars, Calvin gives very little detail concerning the nature of the SD and how it functions. Even the aspects which Calvin does expound on—its being given by God, its universality, and its sufficiency for condemnation—serve more to explain the circumstances surrounding the SD than to define and describe its essence. According to Dowey, this lack of information is due to the fact that Calvin’s major occupation in his developing of the SD is its empirical effects and not analyzing the how and what of its knowledge content. These effects include the universality of religion, the servile fear of God, and the troubled conscience.

As new issues within the church and the world have arisen, many have felt compelled to open the discussion of the SD to aspects that Calvin himself did not feel were essential. One main question around which discussion is centered concerns the question of whether the SD is innate knowledge or an innate capacity for gaining knowledge. With the advent of Reformed Epistemology, these questions become more pressing. Is the SD actual knowledge of God imprinted on man’s mind, as Dowey argues when he states, “It is a material and existential concept describing an actual, vital knowing relationship of the human mind with God”? Or, as Reformed Epistemologist Alvin Plantinga argues, is it “a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances”? 

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2 Institutes, 2.
3 Institutes 3
4 Both Helm and Suddath pick up on this distinction with their divisions of the SD. The rational aspect of the SD is called the “metaphysical-component” by Helm and the “existential component” by Suddath. Helm refers to the affectional aspect of knowledge as the “moral-component,” while Suddath describes it as the “ethical dimension.”
6 The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology, 51.
Paul Helm suggests that perhaps Calvin had two aspects in mind when he was developing the SD. He quotes the *Institutes* 1.5.1, where Calvin states, “God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.” Helm concludes,

> So the SD has two aspects. Each of these aspects is necessary for the proper functioning of the SD and together they are sufficient. The SD might exist for a time without the awareness of features of the external world which daily renews it. Without that repeated triggering, Calvin seems to imply, the sense of God would peter out because the knowledge conveyed by the *sensus* would not be sustained by appropriate features of the environment discerned *a posteriori*. Likewise, without the knowledge to begin with the data supplied by daily experience would be insufficient to sustain the knowledge of God. The *sensus* is thus not merely a sense for knowing God, when it is working properly in the right conditions it is a sense that tells us that there is a God.\(^8\)

Rather than choosing between defining the SD as knowledge or as capacity, Helm emphasizes that both are necessary components.

Suddath agrees with this conclusion, arguing that “Calvin has in view *two* immediate modes, one innate and the other based on experiential conditions.”\(^9\) Yet even as Suddath makes a case for his interpretation of Calvin, he recognizes that the questions we are asking arise from an awareness and understanding of issues that Calvin would not have been concerned with. Calvin approached the development of the SD primarily from a pastoral and not philosophical framework:

> The significant methodological shift that took place between Calvin and the Calvinists suggest an explicit distinction between the Christocentric *biblical* theology and the theocentric *philosophical* theology of his followers. Consequently, where the philosophical theologian is interested in a knowledge of God’s existence (and attributes) by natural reason, Calvin has a different goal in mind. He aims to develop a knowledge of God (not simply of His existence), but a *knowledge which affects and moves to worship*—a knowledge, we might way [sic], that has an existential and ethical dimension.\(^10\)

Thus, a faithful reading of Calvin recognizes that the SD consists of both a knowledge of God and a capacity that uses our experiences to trigger this knowledge. If we have a correct understanding of Calvin’s SD, we will also recognize Calvin’s primarily pastoral concerns as he develops the concepts.

As we enter into the discussion of the nature of the SD, we must recognize that we are often going beyond the scope of what Calvin originally intended. Helm agrees: “In attempting to answer these questions there is the obvious danger that in fine-tuning Calvin’s words we shall go beyond his own ideas, what he thought, to consider what sense his words, taken more abstractly, may bear.”\(^11\) In order to understand Calvin’s legacy in this area, we must first observe how he

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\(^10\) “‘Mediate’ Natural Theology in John Calvin,” 57.

\(^11\) *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 226.
constructed the SD. This knowledge will ground us as we attempt to understand how this concept has been further developed by Calvinists who attempted to use the SD to answer questions which Calvin himself was not concerned with.

**The SD in the Institutes**

In chapter three of the first book of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

> That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.\(^\text{12}\)

This is our first introduction in the *Institutes* to Calvin’s concept of the *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of the divine, which is the knowledge of God that He himself has implanted in the heart of every man. As we have already discusses, the SD has two components: the rational, or that by which we conceive of God’s existence, and the affectional, which is a call to worship that we can either respond to through obedience or rebellion. The SD, together with the work of the conscience and creation’s testimony proclamation, serves as God’s general revelation of himself as Creator. This sense of the divine exists in the hearts of all men and women and is sufficient for their condemnation. The next section of this paper will look at some of the important points which Calvin stresses in his development of the SD: God himself has given man this knowledge, it exists in the heart of all men, and it is knowledge of God as Creator which is sufficient only for condemnation.

The first thing to note is that this knowledge of God has been given to man by God himself. Man does not deduce through his reason that God must exist. Calvin does not argue inductively that all men have a sense of the divine and therefore some form of Deity must exist. Instead, he begins by assuming the existence of God and then, using Scripture, makes the case that all men have an internal knowledge of this God. This recognition that our awareness of God is not due to our own power is a cause for extreme humility; we know God only as he condescends to let himself be known. Even before the Fall, this distinction between our creaturely knowledge of God as Creator and his knowledge of himself reminded man of his dependant status before God.

In chapter three, Calvin provides support for his claim that the SD is universal. He asserts that “there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.”\(^\text{13}\) All men feel compelled to worship something; those who are ignorant of or refuse to worship the God of the Christian Scriptures will inevitably worship at the feet of

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\(^{13}\) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.
something or someone else. The abundance of religious beliefs that flourish throughout the world demonstrates that the sense of the divine which God has implanted in our hearts cannot be stamped out; the urgent thirst to worship the divine can never be satiated. This knowledge of God resides in the heart of even the atheist. Calvin cites the story of Caligula, who vehemently denied the existence of God, but still “shook with terror before the God whom he professedly studied to contemn”\(^\text{14}\) at even the sound of a falling leaf. Caligula’s fear of the judgment of a God whose existence he denied exposed the knowledge implanted in his heart. Every person on this earth, whether he denies the existence of God, worships at the feet of a false deity or bows in reverence before Yahweh, has a deep level awareness of the divine.

Throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin emphasizes the importance of maintaining the distinction between knowledge of God as the Creator and knowledge of him as Redeemer.\(^\text{15}\) The SD only provides a knowledge of the Creator God and remains silent on the issue of God as the Redeemer. Because it reveals nothing of the person and work of Christ or of God’s grace and mercy, the SD remains knowledge sufficient only for condemnation and not for salvation. Scripture alone contains knowledge of God as the Redeemer of his creation.

The Fall has not eradicated the SD from the hearts of men. Both the metaphysical- and moral-cognitive components still exist in the hearts of all men. Our rational abilities have been twisted and distorted. Our affections have also fallen, leading us to seek fulfillment apart from the worship of God. The knowledge of God is stamped on our hearts, and we desire to suppress this knowledge even to the point of self-deception. Where the affecational aspect of the SD does not inspire worship, it rouses fear. It is important to recognize that Calvin stresses that even the person with the most corrupted awareness of God’s presence still has a knowledge of him as the Creator who is worthy of worship that is sufficient for his condemnation.

Calvin sees Scripture as the necessary corrective lens to understanding God’s general revelation in the world. He writes in chapter six, book one,

> For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in their minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly.\(^\text{16}\)

In addition to correcting our understanding of God as the Creator, Scripture expounds on the nature and character of God, providing information that could not be found in general revelation alone. It is only through the special revelation of the Word of God that we come to understand fully what it means for God to be not only our Creator, but also our Redeemer. Through the reading of Scripture and the quickening of the Holy Spirit, we come to possess a saving knowledge of God which Calvin calls “faith.” Only in the context of this kind of knowledge can

\(^{14}\) *Institutes*, 5.

\(^{15}\) Dowey explores this distinction in the *Institutes* in his *The Knowledge of God*, 41-49.

\(^{16}\) *Institutes*, 16.
we begin to rightly understand and interpret the innate knowledge of the divine which God has imprinted on our souls.

To summarize, Calvin has developed an understanding of the SD that condemns all men and necessitates the preaching of the Word. God has implanted within the hearts of all men and women knowledge of himself as Creator that should compel us all to worship. Because this knowledge requires a response, it involves both our rationality and our affections. Even after the corrupting influence of the Fall, this awareness of the divine still exists in the hearts of all men. It is sufficient for the condemnation of those who don’t respond in worship, but it does not provide knowledge of God as Redeemer. Only Scripture can provide a lens through which our knowledge of God as Creator can be corrected as well as a knowledge of God as Redeemer through which men can come to possess the saving knowledge of faith.

III. Reformed Epistemology

An Overview of Plantinga’s Development of the SD

Calvin’s concept of the SD has recently received the spotlight in the development of Reformed Epistemology. Concerning the project of these epistemologists, Hoitenga writes,

[Reformed Epistemology’s] central claim is the immediacy of our knowledge of God. We do not, in the first instance, know God by inference or testimony but by direct acquaintance with him. A closely related claim is that we cannot easily remain indifferent to the God whom we know by such direct acquaintance. Thus our knowledge of God is like our knowledge of every other fundamental kind of reality—physical objects, their properties and relationships, other persons, right and wrong, good and evil, and the elementary objects of logic and mathematics.  

Reformed Epistemologists assume an immediate knowledge of God and affirm Calvin’s understanding of this concept. These academics have greatly contributed not only to the discussion of epistemology but have also influenced the way in which the SD is used in apologetics. For these reasons, it is helpful for us to look at how the Reformed Epistemologists have developed the SD in this discussion of apologetics. In this section, we will examine how Alvin Plantinga has developed the concept of the SD.

Plantinga is not only the most influential Reformed Epistemologist, but he has also incorporated the concept of the SD into his work in a very integral way. His arguments have so marked the development of the SD that his name has become linked with the concept. Plantinga has received much recognition for his defense of foundationalism, an epistemic theory which states that beliefs are justified by other previously justified beliefs. He has used his work with foundationalism to demonstrate the warrant of Christian belief in his book, Warranted Christian

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18 Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism, which states that all knowledge must be based on sense experience and self-evident truth.
Belief. In this groundbreaking work, he has lauded the SD as a necessary component of his argument. This book is an attempt to provide a counter-argument to those who dismiss Christianity with what Plantinga calls the de jure objection, claiming that Christian belief is irrational and unintelligent. A large portion of the book is devoted to explaining that the real question being asked is not “Is Christian belief rational?” but rather “Is Christian belief warranted?”

Plantinga’s response to this question is to develop a model that demonstrates how Christian belief can meet these three conditions for warrant. He calls his model the “A/C model” because of the claims made by Aquinas and Calvin that man possesses a natural knowledge of God and borrows Calvin’s SD as a premise for his model. Plantinga interprets the SD to be a “kind of faculty or mechanism” which produces in us beliefs about God. While he acknowledges that Calvin may have thought that the knowledge itself is innate and not just the capacity, he declines to engage in the discussion of how to interpret Calvin on this point as not necessary to the development of his model. Sidestepping this issue altogether, he then defines the SD as “a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity.” Plantinga makes the case that the belief produced in us by this mechanism is “properly basic”—it does not need to be proved by rational arguments in order to be warranted. Because of the SD, we do not need to have a perceptual experience of God in order to justify our belief in him. God himself has designed our minds to produce belief in his existence and has placed us in a world which proclaims the glory of its Creator.

Apart from the corrupting influence of the Fall on this SD, Calvin’s A/C model would be sufficient to demonstrate the warrant of Christian belief. However, Plantinga recognizes that sin has disordered our faculties, rendering the SD alone an incomplete evidence for our belief in God. It has been “compromised, weakened, reduced, smothered, overlaid, or impeded by sin and its consequences.” Because God is gracious and desires that we might know him, he has given us both Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit to provide a corrective. To incorporate the work of the Holy Spirit and the revelation of Scriptures into his epistemology, Plantinga constructs a new model which he refers to as the “extended A/C model.” In this model, according to Plantinga, “the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit working in concord with God’s teaching in Scripture is a cognitive process or belief-producing mechanism that produces in us the beliefs constituting faith, as well as a host of other beliefs.” He goes on to state that the beliefs constituting faith under this new model are also warranted.

A Calvinist Critique

19 Warranted Christian Belief, 172.
20 Warranted Christian Belief, 173.
21 WCB, 184.
22 WCB 284.
Before we examine some specific critiques concerning the faithfulness of Reformed Epistemology to Calvin’s legacy, we will first take a moment to appreciate the fact that Calvin’s ideas are so directly influencing current philosophical discussion. Oliphint writes,

Not only is it encouraging that Calvin’s thought has become a matter of discussion, but it is significant that such discussion has been prompted by Plantinga, whose stature in the philosophical community is formidable. Just as he has led the way in current debates on epistemological structure and methodology, so also has he introduced into those debates topics and ideas that were heretofore ignored or forbidden.  

The project of Reformed Epistemology provides an example of how Reformed theology can profoundly influence other disciplines.

Plantinga’s recognition that the SD has been corrupted and that the A/C model needs to be extended to include Scripture and the Holy Spirit is very much in line with Calvin’s argument for Scripture being the correcting lens for general revelation. His willingness to surrender human autonomous knowledge in recognition that our capacity for knowledge is given to us by God’s Spirit is a refreshing break from mainstream philosophical thought and honors the Reformed heritage of men like Calvin. However, Reformed Epistemology goes beyond the scope of Calvin’s original intent with developing the SD. This statement is not intended to be a negative critique of Reformed Epistemologists but rather an acknowledgement that Calvin’s concerns differ from that of professional epistemologists. Helm writes,

I suggest that those who look to Calvin as the *fons et origo* of Reformed epistemology are in something of a dilemma at this point…. The problem with appealing to Calvin is that his remarks about the SD are first-order observations. He does not theorize, as in his brief remarks about the grounds for accepting the authority of Scripture, these remarks do not seem to be directly applicable to questions about the rationality of belief in God.  

Elsewhere Helm asserts,

Calvin’s stress is not on the rationality of believing in God, nor on its non-rationality, nor on cognitive mechanisms for the production of knowledge, but on human accountability for the knowledge of God, for either the fact of that knowledge, or for the proper use of the capacity for such knowledge that, as a matter of brute fact, each of us possesses in virtue of the SD.  

Calvin was not constructing an argument to prove foundationalism but rather building a case for the necessity of preaching. His case is firmly grounded in Scripture rather than in philosophical speculation. His focus on the affects of the SD rather than on its nature and functioning demonstrates that Calvin was not primarily interested in developing an epistemology. Rather than be concerned with the justification of the Christian beliefs, Calvin sets up his argument to

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25 *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 321.
demonstrate that the knowledge of God is present in the hearts of all men, a project with much broader implications than that of Reformed Epistemology.

Plantinga and other Reformed Epistemologists are not primarily concerned with providing a faithful reading of Calvin. Rather, they have found that his general concept of the SD has fit nicely with the concept of warranted Christian belief and have thus adapted it to serve their purposes. Although Reformed Epistemology does not reject Calvin’s development of the SD, it takes creative liberties with the concept that brings them beyond the scope of Calvin’s definition and project.

If the SD is used only in epistemological discussions, the range of its implications will become severely limited. Defending a foundationalist epistemology is not a distinctively Christian project, nor is it a position which all Christians would agree with. Because of the nature of the philosophical discussion, Reformed Epistemology is concerned primarily with the metaphysical component of the SD rather than the moral component. The discipline of epistemology rarely concerns itself with the affectional aspects of knowledge. Moreover, the discussion remains confined to the justification of Christian beliefs and cannot be concerned with the universal call on the hearts of all men to worship.

In order to faithfully carry on Calvin’s legacy in purpose as well as content, our use of the SD in the Reformed tradition must be carried beyond the realm of epistemology. The fullest implications of the SD are seen as we develop our theological understanding of how to reach the lost. Calvin’s legacy consists of much more than just his arguments and ideas; to truly live in the Calvinist tradition, we need to inherit his passions and concerns as well. A true Calvinist will therefore not limit his speculation of the SD to the discipline of epistemology; he will be compelled to consider its implications in the preaching of the gospel. We will therefore turn our discussion to the realm of apologetics where the development of the SD affects how the gospel is shared.

**IV. The SD in Reformed Apologetics**

Comparing Reformed Epistemology and Reformed Apologetics

The nature and aim of Reformed Epistemology on the whole is distinct from that of apologetics. Reformed Epistemology cannot be translated directly into a complete defense of the faith. Suddath stresses this distinction in order to quell criticism against the apologetic method of Reformed epistemologists in his essay, “Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics.” He argues that “the alleged ‘failure’ of Reformed epistemology as a method of apologetics is no more of a genuine failure than the ‘failure’ of my Toyota 4-Runner to transport me to the moon is indicative of a genuine failure on the part of my Toyota truck.”

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although both disciplines are concerned with answering some of the same questions, their overall goals are distinct. Hoitenga provides two examples of ways in which the projects differ. First, Plantinga’s main concern is to prove to oneself that Christian belief is justified, while apologetics is primarily motivated by making a defense to someone else. Also, Hoitenga points out that Plantinga is concerned with epistemic justification while the apologist is not bound by the parameters of this kind of justification to make his case. Another difference that Hoitenga does not point out is that epistemology is concerned primarily about the rational aspects of knowledge while apologetics cares about the right ordering of affections as well.

While it is not a complete apologetic system, Reformed Epistemology has made several important contributions to the apologetic project. Because Reformed Epistemology relies so heavily of the concept of the SD, demonstrating the movement’s impact in the area of apologetics reveals an indirect Calvinistic legacy. Reformed Epistemology both serves as an apologetic tool to the believer to reassure him of his faith as well as a pre-apologetic tool in conversation with an unbeliever.

One of the functions of apologetics is to provide the believer with the answers for the hope that he has. When a believer is unsure of the credibility of his Christian beliefs, it can be incredibly reassuring for him to see the work of noted philosophers who assure him that his belief is rational. Providing this assurance for the believer is a vitally important aspect of apologetics which Reformed Epistemology handles very well.

As noted above, Plantinga’s argument for the warrant of Christian belief removes the de jure barriers to an apologetic dialogue. Establishing the warrant of Christian belief acts as a pre-apologetic tool which steers conversation in the direction of discussing the factual claims of Christianity. Because of its strong use on the SD, Reformed Epistemology also emphasizes the use of negative or defensive apologetics over the use of positive or offensive apologetics. If men already possess a knowledge of God, then our time is better served trying to remind them of this knowledge rather than attempting to find another way to convince them of the truth of Christianity.

**The SD and Apologetics: Calvin’s Legacy in the Defense of the Faith**

Calvin’s impact in the field of apologetics extends far beyond his indirect influence through Reformed Epistemology. Indeed, the entire discussion concerning apologetic methods and the point of contact are shaped in part by how much the speaker holds to a Calvinist understanding of the SD. The discipline of apologetics shares with Calvin in many of his ideas and desires. Like Calvin, apologetics is concerned with the advance of the gospel. This field acknowledges with the Reformer that knowledge is more than just a rational assent as it also incorporates a person’s moral response to a reasoned claim. Both the principle of the SD and apologetics are universal in their application and share a keen awareness of the impending judgment of God. As

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27 Both of these considerations are found in *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, 210.
a result of this recognition, both also emphasize the importance of effective communication of the gospel to all men.

As we focus on a Reformed approach to apologetics, the impact of a Calvinist understanding of the SD is both magnified and increased. In addition to feeling his influence in the above ways, many of the tenets of Reformed Apologetics bear the clear mark of Calvin’s legacy. As an apologist in the Reformed tradition engages an unbelieving person in discussion, the entire way in which he guides the conversation is informed by a Calvinist understanding of the SD. Many important themes of the SD which Calvin outlines in the Institutes can be incredibly practical to the reformed apologist who is thinking through how to frame an apologetic conversation.

Reformed Apologetics presupposes God’s existence as the one who makes argument possible. Calvin states that God himself has implanted knowledge of his existence within our hearts. Apart from divine revelation, we could not know that there is a God. Beginning with this premise, we can assume God’s existence from the very beginning rather than thinking of proving God’s existence as only a conclusion to our argument. Moreover, the unbeliever I am talking to also knows that God exists. He and I both share in the innate awareness of God’s presence. Cornelius Van Til argued that this sense of the divine is the starting point of the conversation between me and the unbeliever. He writes, “The point of contact for the gospel, then, must be sought within the natural man. Deep down in his mind every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God.” Oliphint affirms this notion and points out that it gives the Christian apologist an assurance that he is not doing his work alone:

In our defense of Christianity, therefore, we may be confident in the fact that, even before we begin our defense, God has been there, dynamically and perpetually making himself known through every single fact of the unbeliever’s existence. Our apologetic is, then, in a very real sense, a reminder to the unbeliever of what he already knows to be the case.

This realization that our conversation is so guided and informed by what God himself has told us should be a cause for humility and assurance in our lives. It is not primarily up to me as a Christian to convince an unbeliever of God’s existence, but God reminding the unbeliever of what he has already revealed that will open his eyes to the truth of God’s lordship.

A true Calvinist also recognizes the drastic implications of the Fall in the heart of the unbeliever. Although he has an awareness of God, he has chosen to respond by suppressing this knowledge and rebelling against the command to worship. Calvin’s understanding of man’s total depravity and rebellion against the SD has crucial implications in the apologetic discussion. Because the Fall has both caused a corruption of man’s rationality and man has chosen to ignore the

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28 By “Reformed Apologetics,” I am referring to the Presuppositional and Reformed Epistemological methods of apologetics.
knowledge he does possess, the Reformed apologist rejects the notion that reason alone can bring a non-Christian to the point of repentance. My attempt to bring a man to acknowledge the SD in his heart is therefore akin to a “head-on collision,” according to Van Til.31 I am not merely reminding him of something he has forgotten; I am trying to pull his fingers out of his ears so that he can hear the symphony he is desperately trying to ignore.

The Reformed Apologist acknowledges with Calvin that only the correcting lens of Scripture can restore the SD to proper functioning. Calvin stresses the point that only through a saving knowledge of God as Redeemer is a person able and willing to acknowledge God as Creator. Even though the Reformed Apologist uses the SD as the point of contact, his primary purpose in a conversation with an unbeliever is not to bring him to a point where he acknowledges the SD. Instead, he focuses on providing his friend with a knowledge of God as Redeemer and prays that the Holy Spirit will be performing his work of regenerating the affections. This focus affects the methodology of the Reformed Apologist. Instead of providing evidences, he will attempt to get to the heart of the matter and discuss the difference in presuppositions. Van Til asserts that the Christian apologist must both be willing to place himself within his opponent’s framework for the sake of argument as well as “ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do ‘facts’ and ‘laws’ appear intelligible.”32 Only through a redeemed perspective is a man able to fully acknowledge both the existence of God the Creator and his previous awareness of this God’s existence.

Reformed Apologetics Among Other Apologetic Perspectives

The Reformed Apologist shares much in common with apologists from other schools. Each different approach is primarily concerned with leading an unbeliever to a saving knowledge of God. However, each school chooses a different path to reach this point. The varying methods used in apologetic conversation are the outworking of differing views of concepts such as the noetic effects of the Fall. As we compare the Reformed Apologetic to these other views, the distinctiveness of Calvin’s legacy in the Reformed school will become more evident.

Reformed vs. Evidential Apologetics: A Calvinistic Understanding of Proofs

According to Gary Habermas’ exposition in Five Views on Apologetics, the evidentialist “treats one or more historical arguments as being able to both indicate God’s existence and activity and to indicate which variety of theism is true.”33 Drawing primarily from history but also from other fields, the evidentialist creates his case for Christianity using well-documented and widely agreed upon claims. Habermas acknowledges that a person’s prejudices and beliefs will

31 Christian Apologetics, 127.
32 Christian Apologetics, 129.
influence the way that they view data; however, he views these personal interpretations as hindrances to be overcome in the quest for truth. He writes, “Historiography is certainly capable of determining the past. We must just be careful not to read biases into the accounts.” These biases can be overcome because we all operate with certain epistemological similarities that cover areas such as sensory data, scientific theories, and the general rules and application of inference.

This method differs in several ways from a Reformed approach to apologetics. Because God has created us and given us a knowledge of himself through the SD, I don’t start from a position of neutrality and attempt to deduce proofs of his existence by other means. Proofs and evidences may be helpful, but only within the larger context of a Christian framework. This idea is founded in Calvin’s understanding of knowledge as both apprehension of the facts and the appropriate response of worship. The heart’s loyalties frame the context in which we think and understand and cannot be laid aside as we examine evidence. A non-Christian cannot view evidences for the existence of God from a position of neutrality; as Calvin argues, his rejection of the SD entails his living in rebellion against the knowledge of God. His revolt against his Creator and will forbid him to see the soundness of any argument for God’s existence. In response to Habermas, Frame writes,

Even when the unbeliever agrees with the Christian, he does so in the interest of fighting truth, as when the evil spirits cried out that Jesus was “the Holy one of God” (Mark 1:24). For that reason, agreements between believers and unbelievers in apologetic discussions tend to be short-lived and to focus on matters of less than central importance to the gospel.

Our job is not to guide the logic of the unbeliever by providing him with premises of which he is ignorant; rather, we are to confront him with the inconsistencies of his knowledge that are a direct result of his rebellion.

The Reformed Apologist also calls into question the idea of epistemological common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian. When the non-Christian uses reason rightly, it is because he is borrowing from Christian premises. The mind of the unbeliever is a battleground between what he knows to be true from God and what he chooses to believe instead. The chaotic nature of this war makes having proper functioning reason impossible. Only Calvin’s lens of Scripture provides the epistemic corrective necessary to interpret the world correctly. The Reformed apologist should fervently pray for the Spirit to open up the unbeliever’s eyes to a knowledge of God as Redeemer.

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34 “Evidential Apologetics”, 95.
35 “Evidential Apologetics,” 97.
36 “Presuppositional Apologetics,” 135.
The Classical approach has much in common with the Evidential method. Both have a strong confidence in the use of argument as an appeal to common rationality. The Classical apologist, however, uses a two-step method. William Lane Craig writes, “The methodology of classical apologetics was first to present arguments for theism, which aimed to show that God’s existence is at least more probable than not, and then to present Christian evidences, probabilistically construed, for God’s revelation in Christ.”

Natural theology, which argues for the existence of God using reason and arguments from experience (including historical and scientific arguments), becomes a main focus on the Classicalist’s approach.

Much discussion among Reformed apologists exists concerning a Calvinist understanding of natural theology. Most affirm that Calvin employs natural theology but qualify this assertion in such a way that rejects the classical understanding. According to Hoitenga, natural theology is both unnecessary and misleading. If all men have an innate knowledge of God, it is unnecessary and superfluous to find other means to prove his existence. Moreover, a focus on natural theology can mislead a person into prideful thinking that their own rational capabilities have given them knowledge of God. Calvin would not have employed natural theology in such a way that detracts from Scripture and elevates human reason. However, as we have seen in our discussion of Calvin’s defining of the SD as both a knowledge of God and a capacity for knowledge, Calvin affirms that our experiences can shed “fresh drops” on our hearts, reminding us of the knowledge that God has implanted. For this reason, Suddath argues that a ‘mediate’ natural theology is consistent with Calvin’s position and possibly even implicit within his work. The mediate natural theology with which Calvin would be comfortable is inferential: it is “the result of the subject inferring some proposition p from some other proposition q which constitutes an adequate reason for p.”

For Calvin, natural theology must be done within the context of supernatural theology. He did not reject the idea of forming proofs for God’s existence but rather saw that they must be argued for within the broader context of Scriptural knowledge. Oliphant argues that the notion of gaining knowledge of God through natural reason is an Enlightenment concept and is not present in

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38 From *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, 221.
Calvin. Calvin is not worried about the distinction between internal and external evidence for God’s existence. Oliphint writes, “In both cases, the knowledge of God is given to us by God, and it is given to us in such a way that it is clearly seen, understood, and thus it renders us without excuse before him.” Calvin used natural theology in tandem with the SD and understood that a knowledge of God derived from either source was derived from God himself and not from our independent rational abilities.

V. Conclusion

As he draws his essay, “Consistently Reformed,” to a close, Michael Horton shares this provocative thought:

> While D.L. Moody’s alleged rebuff of critics, “I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it,” may be inadequate, it has often been the case that advocates of “rational apologetics” and “evidentialist apologetics” have actually engaged non-Christians in person and in print with greater frequency and passion than many of us.

Can this lack of frequency and passion to share the gospel really be a part of Calvin’s legacy? As we have seen, Calvin himself drew a close correlation between knowledge of concepts and a moral response. The SD was originally intended to compel us to worship. For those of us whose SD has been restored as we have come to know God as Redeemer, knowing that the SD is sufficient for the condemnation of all men should compel us to share the only knowledge that can save.

A true Calvinist has a burning desire to see the gospel preached. She understands that the universal implanted knowledge of God as Creator means that all men and women stand under God’s wrath as they refuse to worship him. Only the knowledge revealed in Scripture of God as Redeemer can save men from eternal damnation. But “How can they believe in the one they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14-15). The Reformed Apologist responds to this appeal with a heart willing and ready to share the saving knowledge of faith that she has found. She realizes that her apologetic task is much larger than simply providing rational arguments to defend her views; it involves engaging a person on both an intellectual and moral level in an attempt to remind him that he already has an awareness of this God. Her arguments presuppose the truth of Christianity, and she does not attempt to use rationality as common ground between her and the unbeliever. Humility saturates her manner, actions, and words, for she realizes that the work of the Holy Spirit and not the power of her arguments which regenerate a person’s mind and affections. While she feels a heavy sense of burden for the lost, she doesn’t despair at the enormity of the task at hand. Rather, she actively rests in the recognition of God’s sovereignty in drawing men to himself.

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Bibliography


