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# Calvin, Charismatics and Miracles

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by Peter F. Jensen

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*Dr. Jensen, who is a lecturer in Moore Theological College, Sydney, has been moved to study the subject of this article partly from a consideration of some of the problems raised by the neo-pentecostal movement for Christians in the Reformed tradition and partly from research into sixteenth-century attitudes to witchcraft. In these as in other matters Calvin appears to have been influenced mainly by his firm conviction of the supremacy of the Word of God.*

THAT Calvin's motto *Prompte et sincere in opere Domini* expressed the living reality of his life few would deny. He was a writer, a theologian, a polemicist, a humanist, a teacher, an organizer, and much else, but primarily he was a man of faith in God.

Calvin's writings must be first of all thought of as the utterance of deeply felt religious convictions that resulted from the primary experience of a sudden conversion in which he felt himself arrested and re-directed by God. . . "God subdued my heart to teachableness."<sup>1</sup>

All the more puzzling, then, that he repudiated contemporary miracles. Certainly he believed in the possibility of the miraculous—scripture taught that; certainly he believed in the present sovereign power of God—few have expounded this doctrine more persuasively; certainly he was himself a man of prayer; but the age of miracles is past.

Other religious leaders and movements have not adopted this stance. The Catholic Church was and is happy to endorse various miraculous events of modern times. The medieval Church could recount miraculous stories to do with innumerable saints and relics as well as more directly with God. As well, its rituals had effective miraculous power in sustaining, defending, securing and attaining. The Quakers of the seventeenth century, and the Pentecostals of the twentieth are further examples of movements which credit the miraculous. Indeed, as is well known, there has emerged within the churches a powerful, miracle-working, third force in Christendom—the charismatic movement. One of its strongest attractions is summarized thus in the words of Michael Harper:

Whatever else may be said, the answer contained in this book has one factor in its favour—it works.<sup>2</sup>

1 J. T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York, 1967), p. 205.

2 *Power for the Body of Christ* (London, 1964), p. 8.

The advantages of this for religion are obvious. First, subjectively there is the sense of immediate experience which it gives. If the Christian religion is to some extent to be fellowship with the invisible, much satisfaction is gained and joy engendered by clear demonstrations of the power of the invisible. Enthusiasm has an appeal; it is a religion which "works".

Second, objectively, there is the validation which miracles provide. Miracles are invaluable polemical material in any controversy. The Bible itself uses the miracles of Jesus in this fashion (e.g. John 5: 36), and the medieval Church did likewise. The doctrine of purgatory, for example, was proven by visitors from beyond, who testified to its existence and horrors. K. Thomas observes:

The medieval Church thus found itself saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth.<sup>3</sup>

But this was true not only of the medieval Church; nor were the wonders rejected too vigorously. Harding, Bishop Jewell's literary adversary, used the following as part of his argument:

The virtuous men of the Society of Jesus, have they not brought many countries, many kings, many princes to the faith of Christ. . . ?  
 . . . The miracles wrought by these holy fathers, which converted these countries, I trust you will not account to be madness.<sup>4</sup>

In fact Thomas reports of the late sixteenth century,

Instances of miraculous cures and deliverances in English recusant literature are too many to be worth enumerating.<sup>5</sup>

A possible answer to this puzzling feature of Calvin's thought is that he is being scrupulously true to the word of scripture. After all, those who differ, whether they be Catholics or Charismatics, use and value scripture, but are prepared to be less narrow in defining the locus of revelation and authority. In many of the cases in which the Reformers declined to follow Rome it was because Scripture forbade them, by its silence or its direct word.

However, the answer is not as simple as that. The Bible nowhere indicates that the miraculous is to cease when the apostolic age is over. On the contrary, there is evidence that this divine effusion is to be coterminous with Church history. Take, for example, the words of Jesus:

He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do . . . (John 14: 12, 13).

<sup>3</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Jewell* (Cambridge, 1845), Vol. iii, p. 195. Jewell's reply must be recorded, "I marvel he saith not, 'the man in the moon was likewise newly christened' to make up the number." *Ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> K. Thomas, *op cit.*, p. 73, n.5.

## Or the words of Paul:

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, government, divers kinds of tongues (1 Cor. 12: 28).

## Or of James:

Is any among you sick? . . . the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up (James 5: 14, 15).

## Or the words of Jesus once more:

And these signs shall follow them that believe: in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover (Mark 16: 17, 18).<sup>6</sup>

Charismatic theologians have effectively drawn out the lesson.

## J. Rodman Williams writes, for example:

We know that the world of extraordinary healing, mighty works of deliverance, and so on, ought never to have become alien to us. It was surely not thus to primitive Christianity. We now realize how much we have been blinded by a modern world view that intellectually and empirically views all that happens—or may happen—as belonging to the realm of natural forces.<sup>7</sup>

The typical Reformed position seems therefore to be at odds with scripture itself. The authority of scripture alone is not the simple answer; on the contrary it poses the question yet more sharply. How is Calvin to deal with such passages as seem to point to the continued existence of charismata such as glossolalia in the church?

A survey of the way in which glossolalia has been treated by Aquinas, Erasmus and Calvin is instructive at this point.

Glossolalia, or unintelligible “speech”, uttered in ecstasy and reputed to be caused by a spirit, has been a feature of religions other than Christianity, but it has found its place in the latter as well notably in the charismatic movement. Thus, S. Angus locates it, both in the Christian religion and the mystery cults, and likens it to Plato’s “divine frenzy”.<sup>8</sup>

Glossolalia is presented in the primitive Christian documents (Acts 2: 4-13; 10: 46; 19: 6; 1 Cor. 12-14) as a miraculous, Spirit-inspired event, an event, however, which seems like a self-engendered superstition in modern eyes. It is of some interest therefore, in a survey of the sixteenth-century world-view, to ascertain what was then understood to have taken place, and whether these later authors believed glossolalia to be relevant to their own day.

In an earlier period, Aquinas discusses glossolalia, or “the grace of tongues” in the *Summa Theologica*. He conducts this discussion

<sup>6</sup> Calvin regarded these words as authentic, although they are now doubted by most textual critics.

<sup>7</sup> *The Era of the Spirit* (Plainfield N.J., 1971), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (London, 1925), p. 101.

on the assumption that "tongues" constitute a miraculous but intelligible phenomenon, in which the speaker is able to preach in a foreign language:

... both Paul and the other apostles were divinely instructed in the languages of all the nations sufficiently for the requirements of teaching the faith.<sup>9</sup>

In this, Aquinas quotes Augustine to the same effect; a quotation which includes the further thought that this miracle had ceased:

Whereas even now the Holy Ghost is received, yet no-one speaks in the tongues of all nations, because the Church herself already speaks the languages of all nations: since whoever is not in the Church receives not the Holy Ghost.<sup>10</sup>

That foreign languages (rather than ecstatic babble) is meant seems to have been the position of most of the Fathers.<sup>11</sup>

In his Colloquy, "The Apotheosis of that incomparable worthy John Reuchlin", Erasmus includes a prayer which begins:

O God . . . who through thy chosen servant John Reuchlin hast renewed to the world the gift of tongues by which thou didst once from heaven, through the Holy Spirit, instruct the apostles for the preaching of the gospel, grant that all men everywhere may preach in every tongue the glory of thy Son Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

If this mirrors Erasmus' own thought, it shows an interesting shift of opinion. Tongues were a miraculous gift, but can now be used to describe the labour of learning Greek and Hebrew. For Thomas they had ceased; for Erasmus they had recurred, but in a different manner. Calvin shares the latter view:

Since there is no doubt that Paul has bestowed undying honour on tongues in this verse, it is easy to deduce what sort of spirit moves those critics who make strong attacks against the study of languages with as much insulting language as they can muster.<sup>13</sup>

He took interpretation of tongues (a separate gift mentioned in I Cor. 12-14) quite literally as the ability to translate. This would have been needed in apostolic days when a man, even though he spoke many tongues, did not know the speech of a particular con-

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, second part of second part, question 176 (London, 1934), Vol. xiv, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. Maclean, "Tongues, Gift of", *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh, 1909), p. 943. There are grounds for believing that the New Testament itself meant foreign speech rather than babble. One cannot accuse the Fathers of misunderstanding the concept of ecstatic speech, therefore.

<sup>12</sup> *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, transl. C. R. Thompson (Chicago and London, 1965), p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> On I Cor. 14: 5.

<sup>14</sup> On I Cor. 12: 28.

gregation. Certainly, however, both speech and translation were by miracle in the early days:

They did not at that time acquire these gifts by hard work or studying; but they were theirs by a wonderful revelation of the Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

However, the miracle did not imply that the speaker was a non-comprehending channel:

For how laughable it would have been had the tongue of a Roman been directed by the Spirit of God to utter Greek words, when he himself had no knowledge of Greek whatever.<sup>16</sup>

There are reports of strange foreign speech in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but they were not labelled as scriptural tongues. Rather, they were an evidence of witchcraft or demon possession. John Cotta writes:

Some other sick persons have . . . spoken languages knowingly and understandingly, which in former time they did never know, nor could afterward know again. . .<sup>17</sup>

Thus, for the Protestant mind at least, the miraculous element was no longer relevant except as a mark of demonic activity. Instead, tongues were identified with a strenuous intellectual effort, and then clothed with the New Testament language, e.g. the word "gift". Prophecy underwent the same metamorphosis. Calvin was conscious of being a citizen of a world different from the apostolic. The miraculous was not simply banished—it was replaced by rational human effort.

However, we are still left with the puzzling question of why he took this path, since as a deeply religious man he would *prima facie* be assisted objectively and subjectively by allowing the validity of miracles.

One influence which would have helped created Calvin's scepticism about contemporary miracles was his humanist background. In Erasmus, for instance, we find a healthy disregard for ecclesiastical superstitions, and in fact the belief that only the Biblical miracles were worthy of credence.

He was well known for his satires of monastic trickery. Thus in his Colloquy, *The Repentant Girl*, he pictures the lay sisters of a convent frightening a new member with the appearance of a horrible spectre,<sup>18</sup> and the same theme is the subject of another piece entitled

<sup>15</sup> On 1 Cor. 12: 11.

<sup>16</sup> On 1 Cor. 14: 14.

<sup>17</sup> *The Triall of Witch-craft* (London, 1616), pp. 76f. "Sick" in this context means bewitched. See also R. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, [1584] 1964), p. 68, where the person is sick, but not possessed.

<sup>18</sup> *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, transl. C. R. Thompson (Chicago and London, 1965), p. 113.

*Exorcism of the Spectre* in which some friends fool a parish priest into exorcizing a non-existent ghost.<sup>19</sup>

Erasmus puts these words into the mouth of Folly:

Here is a sort of men who beyond any doubt bear my trademark wholly—the ones who find joy in either hearing or telling monstrous lies and strange wonders. They never get enough of such stories, so long as prodigies are recounted, involving banshees, goblins, devils or the like.<sup>20</sup>

But it was not simply that he was astute enough to perceive the foibles of the men he met. He believed that the age of miracles was finished. Thus, the following exchange takes place in *The Well-to-do Beggars*:<sup>21</sup>

*Keeper*: The apostles were renowned for their miracles. . . You can't do anything like that.

*Conrad*: We could if we were like the apostles and if the situation called for a miracle. But miracles were granted at the time for the sake of unbelievers. Nowadays we need only a holy life. . .

In a letter to an unnamed English bishop he wrote:

The Christian religion nowadays does not require miracles, and there are none; but you know what lying stories are set about by crafty knaves.<sup>22</sup>

It may be that in adopting this position he was a child of the renewed interest in the past in a double sense. First, by being well-read in the ancient sceptics like Lucian (in fact, *Exorcism of the Spectre* owes some of its machinery to Lucian<sup>23</sup>). Second, by following that temper associated with the return to beginnings. He who was continually given to the task of distinguishing true from false in ancient texts brought the same critical spirit to bear on contemporary life.

There is no doubting Calvin's debt to these modes of thought. His familiarity and sympathy with both antiquity and the humanists can be assessed from his first publication, the commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*. Although the book failed to secure the hoped-for reputation for its author, and although some of it can be shown to be derivative,<sup>24</sup> it deserves attention for the light it throws on Calvin's extensive knowledge of the ancient authors, and his skill as a philologist and exegete.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230ff.

<sup>20</sup> *The Praise of Folly*, transl. H. H. Hudson (Princeton, N.J., 1970), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Colloquies*, op. cit., p. 208. See also, *A Fish Diet*, *ibid.*, pp. 340f.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *Life and Letters of Erasmus* by J. A. Froude (London, 1910), p. 360.

<sup>23</sup> *Colloquies*, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> See F. L. Battles, "The Sources of Calvin's Seneca Commentary", in *Courtney Reformation Studies*, Vol. 1, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford, Abingdon, 1966), p. 57.

It reveals a sturdy Calvin, willing to differ from authority, and even to snipe at the great Erasmus; it also demonstrates a zeal to come to terms with the original text;<sup>25</sup> and it thus reveals just those marks which could have helped Erasmus to be somewhat sceptical of the miraculous. However, unfortunately for our purposes, it gives only the barest indication of the attitude of the young Calvin.

Quirinius Breen suggests that it is significant in this connection that Calvin chose Seneca.<sup>26</sup> He contends that the renaissance of interest in Stoicism with its promotion of free investigation and its denigration of ecclesiastical magic<sup>27</sup> in favour of the simple discharge of duty before God, influenced Calvin in three areas:

- (a) It gave him freedom from the official line in church history.
- (b) It prompted a life-long endeavour to establish the true text of scripture.
- (c) It enabled him to criticize absolute monarchy.

Calvin's commentary on *De Clementia* contains little that is specifically Christian, and even less that is relevant to the question of his opinion of the intervention by God into the contemporary world. Yet as far as a sceptical tempter is concerned, it is interesting to observe his agreement with Cato and Cicero concerning the emptiness of soothsaying,<sup>28</sup> and his mocking laughter at the emperor-worship of the Romans. There were still citizens who believed in the former at least, but Calvin was not one of them.

It is clear, however, that this is insufficient to explain the puzzle. For Calvin was a humanist before he was converted; and although it is true that he used the humanist tools in the service of the God who had arrested him, yet it was with increasing discrimination. Indeed a stand against miracles might have been thought of as a logical first casualty after a conversion to a deeply pious Christian faith. More needs to be said, as Egil Grislis agrees:

He exhibits an impressive agreement with classical thought, as represented by Cicero, and at the same time undertakes a basic re-interpretation of it from the standpoint of biblical revelation.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Q. Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Hamden, Conn., 1968), p. 67ff.

<sup>27</sup> S. Angus, op. cit., p. 33: "Cicero was astonished that anyone could believe in the office of augur."

<sup>28</sup> See Cicero, *De Divinatione*, and especially II, XXIV. Note also the assessment of E. Grislis, "Calvin's Use of Cicero in the Institutes I: 1—A Case Study in Theological Method", *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 62, (1971), Heft 2, p. 14, that Calvin was "... a practising humanist whose interest in Cicero was not a mere curiosity, but a case of genuine dependence."

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

The next investigation, therefore, must be one into the writings of Calvin himself. What theological reasons had he for this unusual and, *prima facie*, unscriptural attitude to the supernatural?<sup>30</sup>

It is obvious that a preliminary reply must mention the doctrine of providence. Calvin's writings display an overwhelming sense of the immediacy of God's presence and power in the world, and in a true sense everything that occurs is wonderful.

Man . . . is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom, and contains within himself enough miracles to occupy our minds. . . For there are as many miracles of divine power . . . as there are kinds of things in the universe.<sup>31</sup>

For such a way of observing the world, a miracle is almost unnecessary. Religious experience is fed by the daily affairs of life, all of which are theistically interpreted; one's religion may run off into the "providential" stream,<sup>32</sup> but this is of a different order from the quest for demonstrations of God's intermittent and spectacular power in wondrous events.

However, although the "providential" view of life may have been strongly influential in Calvin's view of miracles, it is not to this that he characteristically adverts when he discusses the topic. Rather, it is the word of God which provides the context of his remarks.

A feature of Calvin's theology is the strictness with which he holds the conviction that religion is given, not manufactured. Mankind is certainly adept at creating religion, but this is both perverse and culpable. Non-Christians are especially guilty of this, but Christians, too, must be careful not to transgress the proper bounds; for example, there are rules set within which we may pray, and since much of our prayer arises from the demands of the flesh it will not be answered, no matter how hard we "believe".

Thus, whenever we mix up our own opinions with the word of God, faith degenerates into frivolous conjectures . . . [God] is never worshipped aright but when we receive him as he presents himself to us.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Passages from the Commentaries and Sermons which have been consulted are those on: Exod. 4: 5, 8, 31; 7: 8-14, 22; 8: 18; 10: 1f; 20: 18-21. Matt. 4: 23; 8: 17, 25; 9: 20; 10: 1; 11: 4; 20: 32; 21: 1f, 14; Mark 8: 11-13; 16: 20; Luke 16: 30; John 2: 11, 18; 3: 2; 4: 45-54; 5: 1-9; 6: 14; 7: 31; 9: 3; 11: 15; 14: 12, 13; 15: 24; Rom. 1: 16; 12: 6; 15: 18; 1 Cor. 1: 22; 12-14 (*passim*); 2 Cor. 12: 12; Gal. 3: 1-5 & Eph. 4: 11; 2 Thess. 2; Heb. 2: 4; James 5: 14. *Institutes*: Prefatory Address, 3: Book 1/Chapter 8/sections 5, 6; 1/13/13; 1/14/22; 4/14/22; 4/14/18; 4/17/24, 25; 4/19/6; 4/19/19-21.

<sup>31</sup> *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1/5/3; 1/14/21.

<sup>32</sup> As represented, for example, by Cromwell's schoolmaster, T. Beard, in *The Theatre of God's Judgements* (London, 1613); see also Calvin's comments on Elymas, Acts 13: 11, and again on verse 12: "If God do now miraculously strengthen in the minds of many the faith of the gospel . . . let us not murmur against him . . . if he do not daily show such miracles as we would desire."

<sup>33</sup> On John 16: 15.



Modes of worship regulated according to our own fancy, and honours rashly contrived by men, have no other advantage than this, that they rob God of his true honour, and pour upon him nothing but reproach.<sup>34</sup>  
 . . . where faith reigns there is no asking for anything indiscriminately, but only for what the Lord promises.<sup>35</sup>

The Christian life begins with the communication of the word of God, does not exist without teaching, consists in being ruled over by the word, "trusting in the testimonies of scripture",<sup>36</sup> and, in fact, "should find its peace in the Word of God."<sup>37</sup> Thus it is the constant communion between the soul and God, begun, continued and ended by the Word of God, given by God. To put it otherwise, the confidence in God which, according to Calvin, was a legitimate possession of the child of God,<sup>38</sup> was essential to faith itself, since it was based upon the never-failing oracles of God. If God's word were to be God's word, then the soul must be able to repose with boldness in its promises and obey with alacrity its injunctions. To cast doubt upon the word, therefore, was not to raise a point for theoretical dispute, but to throw the soul itself into doubt and confusion, dishonour God, and reveal oneself to be in league with Satan.

We may infer that the Papists, having come to an arrangement with Satan, cruelly to expose souls to their destruction for his delight, are by their malicious suppression of Scripture robbing God's people of their arms, with which alone they may manage to protect their salvation.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note the specifically religious feeling in these words. A matter of spiritual life and death is involved; strong personal convictions are at stake. It is precisely at this point that contemporary miracles posed a threat to Calvin, a threat therefore as spiritual as it was intellectual.

Adversaries of the Reformer's doctrine, especially amongst the Catholics, called upon Calvin to demonstrate the truth of his teaching by miraculous events, just as Harding called upon Jewell. They themselves had much to offer in this area; it was a strong apologetic line to adopt, as we have noted above. Furthermore, certain extra-scriptural doctrines owed a great deal to a miraculous element. The doctrine of purgatory had been taught to men by a succession of ghostly visitors from the time of Gregory I in the sixth century;<sup>40</sup> in the Mass the Church could witness and control a daily miracle of impressive proportions and power to protect the faithful; the belief

<sup>34</sup> On John 16: 15.

<sup>35</sup> On Matt. 17: 19.

<sup>36</sup> On Matt. 15: 23.

<sup>37</sup> On Matt. 8: 25.

<sup>38</sup> In this, of course, he differed from later Calvinists (e.g. the Westminster Divines) who separated assurance from faith. See Chapter XVIII, part 3 of *The Confession of Faith*.

<sup>39</sup> On Luke 4: 4.

<sup>40</sup> Especially in his Fourth Book of Dialogues.

in prayers to Mary and other saints was confirmed by the many healings attributable to them and their relics.<sup>41</sup> In other words, doctrines believed by the Reformers to be not merely extra to scripture but contrary to the whole method of God's dealing with man, the gospel of the grace of God, were sustained by the miraculous.

Theoretically, it would have been possible for Calvin to encourage the flowering of miracles done through Protestant hands. He could have met power with power. Alternatively, he could have accepted the claim that miracles were possible, and sifted through them to claim as many as he could for Protestant doctrine. He took neither course. Rather, the age of miracles, he declared, was past. The reason why he adopted this posture has to do with his assessment of the function of the Biblical miracles.

In the Bible, according to Calvin, miracles were given for the purpose of arousing interest in, or confirming, the word of God.<sup>42</sup> They were often, but not invariably, used to distinguish God's ministers.<sup>43</sup> They did, it is true, display the goodness of God<sup>44</sup> and, as well, acted as parables for the spiritual nature of the ministry of Christ. These facts themselves, however, show their limitations. The Biblical wonders were sufficient. Isaiah 35

contains a description of the Kingdom of Christ, under which God promises that he will be so generous and kind as to give help and remedy to all the sick. This refers, without a doubt, to a spiritual liberation from all ills and miseries. But, as was said before, Christ shows by outward symbols that he came as a spiritual physician to heal souls. Why then did he not raise all the dead? The reply is easy. A certain fixed limit was assigned to miracles by the purpose of God, so far as he knew to be sufficient for confirming the Gospel.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, so tied to doctrine were the miracles, that they did not demonstrate a new zeal by God to cure all human sickness, but rather his purpose of planting the gospel appropriately. Thus apostles are able, by God's power, and in a way distinct from Christ, to work miracles. This is both the seal of their ministry (see on 2 Cor. 12: 12), and the testimony that Christ, though absent bodily, is really Lord (see on Mark 16: 20). If John 14: 12,13 were to be urged on Calvin (see above p. 132) as a place where Christ promised miracles as a perpetual possession of the Church, he would reply that these words were addressed to the Apostles, as apostles (see

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, of course, wrote a famous ironical tract *An Admonition Showing the Advantages which Christendom Might Derive from An Inventory of Relics*. See also Article XI of the *Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris, with The Antidote* by John Calvin.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. on Acts 8: 6.

<sup>43</sup> On John 2: 18.

<sup>44</sup> On Matt. 11: 4.

<sup>45</sup> On John 11: 42.

commentary). Thus the promise died with them. The same reasoning is true of Mark 16: 20, which, although addressed to all who believe, is not allowed by Calvin to apply in quite that way:

His equipping the faithful with this gift is not to be applied to each single one, for we know that his gifts were distributed variously, so that the power of miracles was confined to certain people.

Though Christ does not say exactly whether he wished this to be an occasional gift, or one to abide in his Church for ever, yet it is more likely that miracles were only promised for a time to add light to the new and as yet unknown Gospel. It may be that through the fault of its ingratitude the world has lost this privilege, yet I would say that the real purpose for which miracles were appointed was to give enough assurance for the Gospel teaching at its outset.<sup>46</sup>

Miracles, therefore, adorn the word. A faith based on the miraculous is insufficient,<sup>47</sup> and the miraculous itself will not engender authentic faith although men continually claim that it will.<sup>48</sup> On the contrary men are

... almost always mistaken with respect to miracles unless [God's] word enlightens them to dispel the darkness.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, the teaching of Calvin is that the word must of necessity dominate the sign, since the word is what brings faith and explains the sign. He exploits fully those scriptural passages which predict the coming of false teachers who will have power to work miracles (Deut. 13: 1ff.; 2 Thess. 2; Mark 13). In each case the Catholics are cast in the role of those who come with their Satanic teaching conjoined to their Satanic power.

God doth never suffer [miracles] to be separated from his word . . . and God hath wrought miracles, for the most part, whereby the world might know him not simply, or in his bare majesty, but in his word.

Whence we may easily gather how foolishly the Papists deal, when as they endeavour to lead the world away from the reverence of God and the gospel by bare miracles. . . Now must we see whether the gospel command us to call upon the dead, to burn incense to idols, to translate unto feigned saints the grace of Christ, to take in hand vowed pilgrimages to invest profane worshipings, whereof there is no mention made in the Word of God; but there is nothing more contrary to the gospel than that these superstitions should take place.<sup>50</sup>

The Christian can never be persuaded about doctrine on the basis of a miracle, since it could easily be a Satanic delusion allowed by

46 Christ is the author, they the servants, of miraculous power. See on John 15: 24. Note also that Calvin is too careful an interpreter to say straight out that the promise was for the apostolic age only. It is the theological function of miracles, together with the "fact" that they ceased after the apostolic age, which decided him. But his words here and on James 5: 14-16 show a degree of caution.

47 On Mark 16: 20.

48 On John 4: 48.

49 On Deuteronomy 13: 3.

50 On Acts 14: 3.

God as a test. The word is everything, even should contemporary miracles occur. But so certain is Calvin that the scriptures are the sufficient revelation of God, that he cannot conceive how further miracles need occur. When challenged to prove his doctrine with miracles, he replied:

In demanding miracles of us, they act dishonestly. For we are not forging some new gospel, but retaining that very gospel whose truth all the miracles that Jesus Christ and his apostles ever wrought serve to confirm. But, compared with us, they have a strange power: even to this day they can confirm their faith by continual miracles! Instead they allege miracles which can disturb a mind otherwise at rest—they are so foolish and ridiculous, so vain and false. Well, we are not entirely lacking in miracles, and these very certain and not subject to mockery.<sup>51</sup>

The miracles he claims are undoubtedly those recorded in scripture.

Thus Calvin dismisses Catholic claims, not because they are all completely untrue, but on the grounds that they contradict the corpus of revelation. This procedure (if not his result!) is certainly Biblical. But, he goes further and discounts all miracles on the score that they would disturb the completeness of a faith now delivered in its entirety and sealed at the time by miracles enough. While, as he admits, this is not the clear teaching of any scriptural passage, it does conform to the investigation he has made of the way in which miracles were used in the Bible.

But there is yet another element at work here. The point has been made clearly enough that Calvin valued the word as the very instrument of the soul's relationship to God. The Catholic apologists threatened the objective truth of Calvin's teachings and this was met in the way already described; but they also threatened a most sensitive point of Calvin's subjective spiritual experience—observe his words quoted above, "a mind otherwise at rest".

It was characteristic of that experience to speak out and dwell upon the promises, testimonies and commandments of God, virtually to feed on these things. Herein Calvin found nothing to encourage him to speak for miracles, whatever might have been the experience of the apostles. He saw very clearly that a pattern of scriptural *events* did not constitute that direct *word* to his soul by which he sought to relate to God. That the Apostles were enabled to do a work did not mean that the sixteenth-century Christian was. Even the Apostle did not have a free hand to heal all sickness.<sup>52</sup>

For God does not command us to hope for everything forthwith when he offers us eternal salvation. It may be that many may receive the gospel, and yet shall not be cured of those diseases wherewith they are vexed.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Institutes*, Prefatory Address, section 3.

<sup>52</sup> See on Acts 9: 34.

<sup>53</sup> See on Acts 14: 19.

Exorcism is not a modern office; those who claim it are neglectful of the real import of God's word, like certain Jews in Paul's day:

I do not doubt but that this office did proceed of foolish emulation . . . [God] had used the prophets in times past as ministers to drive away devils; . . . and hereupon was erected unadvisedly an extraordinary function without commandment of God. . . Wherefore we are taught by this example, that we must attempt nothing, unless we have the light of God's word going before us, lest we suffer like punishment for our sacrilege. The Lord himself commanded us to pray. Whosoever they be which have not the gift of miracles given to them, let them keep themselves with these bounds. For when the apostles made the unclean spirits come out of men, they had God for their author, and they knew that they did faithfully execute the ministry which he had enjoined them.<sup>54</sup>

This is a most instructive example of how Calvin refuses to turn a pattern into a promise. His comments on the woman with the issue of blood are to the same point:

the standard rule remains that our faith should not be led off this way and that by individual instances. . .<sup>55</sup>

Thus the scripture becomes a sensitive instrument in the relationship between God and man, not to be used carelessly to invent offices or actions which do not have the sanction of God himself. Calvin does not reject contemporary miracles despite his religious experience, but, rather, because of it.

In one sense the debate was about power and reason, as is the corresponding debate at this day. Calvin was accused in his views of the sacraments of emptying God's power by worshipping the reasonable. His cerebral approach to religion denied it its mystery and power. To this he made indignant reply. The myth of transubstantiation is so foolish a miracle that

when it is taken away, God himself vanished with his power.

In contrast the Calvinist doctrine of the sacrament,

. . . having surmounted the world on the wings of faith, soars up to heaven. We say Christ descends to us both by the outward symbol and by his Spirit, that he may truly quicken our souls by the substance of his flesh and blood. He that does not perceive that many miracles are subsumed in these few words is more than stupid.<sup>56</sup>

It was typical of Calvin's religion to credit the relational with power. The gospel, the preached word, is power, the real power.<sup>57</sup> The seat of power is word not deed. Things which men had feared or used as supernatural were illusory and Satanic effects, to be eschewed, never harnessed, even with ecclesiastical sanction. Glossolalia was language study; prophecy was preaching; exorcism

<sup>54</sup> See on Acts 19: 13.

<sup>55</sup> On Matt. 9: 20; see also on Matt. 20: 32.

<sup>56</sup> *Institutes*, 4/17/24.

<sup>57</sup> See on Rom. 1: 16.

was illicit; the menacing or promising possibilities of power were heavily diminished. The believer was taught that he neither needed it nor feared it. Such was his assurance.

For Calvin the word of God abandoned miraculous power both by its clear teaching and in its inner meaning for the spiritual life; especially it banned that religion which was called Catholic, but which Calvin thought to be anti-Christian. He abandoned, too, what could be called the counter-magic by which men had dealt with the devilish power of magic and sorcery.<sup>58</sup> In its place the believer was left with prayer and the word alone; that is, with his humble yet assured dependence on the God who orders all things on heaven and earth; this served to remind him that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Let us remember this when the injurious treatment of others provokes us to revenge. Our natural disposition would lead us to direct all our exertions against the men themselves; but this foolish desire will be restrained by the consideration that the men who annoy us are nothing more than darts thrown by the hand of Satan. . . . To wrestle with flesh and blood will not only be useless, but highly pernicious. We must go straight to the enemy, who attacks and wounds us from his concealment,—who slays before he appears.<sup>59</sup>

The charismatic movement is a quest for power. That is its appeal and its promise: it brings heaven down to earth. It validates its Spirit-baptism theology with the miraculous; it offers experiential religion. But it seems likely that Calvin would have seen in it a new and erroneous version of the Christian life, assaulting the "mind at rest" with false promises and ultimately robbing it of all that is worth possessing in the Christian gospel. He would, therefore, have rejected it decisively; whether rightly or not is another matter.

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<sup>58</sup> This, then, is relevant to "that great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world . . .", spoken of by M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, E. T. (London, 1962), p. 105.

<sup>59</sup> On Eph. 6: 12.