

The Logic and Exegesis behind Calvin's Doctrine of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit to the Authority of Scripture

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One of John Calvin's notable passages in his *Institutes* is his articulation of the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the reader of Scripture, and the Scripture itself.¹ The relationship between these entities is presented thus:

For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.²

This apologetically oriented selection from the *Institutes* is known as Calvin's doctrine of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to the authority of Scripture. In Latin, it is referred to as the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti interna* and hereafter, the "*testimonium*."³ Historically, this doctrine represented a departure from Rome's doctrine of *testimonium ecclesiae* which stressed the church's role in defining Scripture and giving it its authority.⁴

1. "The doctrine of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit is a gift of John Calvin to the church. Other writers had seen it but none wrote about it so effectively as he." M. E. Osterhaven, *The Faith of the Church: A Reformed Perspective on Its Historical Development* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 12–13. For a similar conclusion about the uniqueness of Calvin's contribution, see George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 72. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Society for the Study of Theology meeting at York University in England, 2011.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Belingham, Wash.: Logos Research Systems, 2010), 1.7.4.

3. For a critical interaction with contemporary philosophical objections to the self-authenticating witness of Scripture, see William Lane Craig, "Classical Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, eds. Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 29 n1.

4. For this reason, a statement similar to Calvin's doctrine of *testimonium* appears in the Belgic Confession (Art. 5). For a brief discussion of the historical significance,

The *testimonium* represents the subjective side of the authority of Scripture, whereas the *indicia* represent objective matters of authority such as historicity, accuracy, etc. Louis Berkhof explains that Calvin's *testimonium* means that "[t]he final ground of faith is Scripture only, or better still, the authority of God which is impressed upon the believer in the testimony of Scripture."⁵ For Calvin, the objective evidence is not simply the other side of the coin of subjectivity. Rather, the subjective witness of the Holy Spirit stands above all other evidence, powers, rationality, or institutions.⁶ This means that there is an "asymmetric" relationship between external or objective evidence and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Contemporary Reformed theologians including Graham Cole have probed the *testimonium* and found it confusing or perplexing.⁸ Henk Van Den Belt's excellent study of the Reformed doctrine of the self-authentication of Scripture also finds difficulties with the doctrine.⁹ In this study, I will examine Calvin's *testimonium* with two lines of argumentation. First, I want to bring additional nuance to this doctrine by framing the nature of its logic with respect to its circularity. Second, I want to examine claims that Calvin's *testimonium* does not stand exegetical scrutiny.

Calvin's *testimonium* and Logic

"The Christian Scripture is the authoritative Word of God because I know it is the Authoritative Word of God."¹⁰ To restate Calvin's doctrine in this hypothetical way would be a gross misrepresentation of

see G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 40–41.

5. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 185.

6. John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville, Ky.: WJKP, 1989), 63.

7. Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 251.

8. Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 271–73; R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2005), 115.

9. Henk Van Den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 320.

10. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1987), 131.

the *testimonium*. Yes, the *testimonium* utilizes circular logic;¹¹ that is not being disputed. However, it matters a great deal how tight or broad the circularity is. In this first section, I wish to demonstrate that the circular argument is broad and not vicious in its logic.

Some circular argumentation is vicious while some is not. Vicious circularity is creating a narrow or small circular argument that is so tight that it attacks itself and undermines itself. Rosalind M. Selby explains, “This would surely be a viciously circular argument—through revelation we believe in the incarnation and the (mediated) words of God in scripture, so in order to preserve these we must accept revelation.”¹² Vicious circularity, negatively stated, does not (1) set forth its conclusion with its rationale, (2) provide a framework for interpretation of data, or (3) clarify the meaning of its conclusion(s).¹³ There are three aspects of the circularity of the *testimonium* that I want to highlight to demonstrate that it is not viciously circular.

First, the circle moves through the person of the Holy Spirit. This is the unique twist to the *testimonium*. There are actually two persons at work in the subjective experience of the one who believes that the Scripture is the Word of God. The person of the Holy Spirit is able to inhabit or enter into a person to affect their faculties (the mind, spirit, or soul). This is possible because the Holy Spirit is God. In addition, this same Holy Spirit authored the Scriptures about which He is testifying. The one testifying is both author and God. The person of the Holy Spirit is not so much a criterion as He is a unique epistemic agent.¹⁴ This is closely related to, and interconnected with the next point.

11. R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin's First Commentaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 74.

12. Rosalind M. Selby, *Comical Doctrine: An Epistemology of New Testament Hermeneutics* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006), 46. For the distinction between vicious circularity and the circle of truth see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God: Volume 2, Part 1*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 243.

13. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 131–32.

14. Kevin Vanhoozer refers to Robert Johnson's distinction between a “criterion” and a “*discrimen*” in order to communicate the inseparable nature of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. The word *discrimen* is Latin for space or interval. While there is a space between Scripture and the Holy Spirit, this gap is theologically closed. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005), 232 n77.

Second, the circle moves through Scripture. Calvin refers to this as the *autopistia* of Scripture. The Holy Spirit is the author of all Scripture because He inspired and moved men to write what they did. When confirming the authority of Scripture, the Holy Spirit always works through Scripture. Being God, He was able to write what is sufficient for this purpose. The Holy Spirit works through His own writings. Paul Helm explains, “[I]n Calvin’s view the work of the Holy Spirit is not to energize the will to take a leap of faith, but to open the eyes of the mind to see what is objectively there, present in the data of Holy Scripture, and to incline the will to accept it.”¹⁵ The meaning of the text of Scripture is a vital part of its self-authenticating authority. Van Den Belt provides a helpful study of the *autopistia* of Scripture as it relates to the *testimonium* of the Spirit.¹⁶ Calvin’s concept of the *testimonium* of the Spirit (as subject) was intimately tied to the *autopistia* of the Word (as object).

Third, the circle moves through faith, reason, the emotions, and the will. Calvin avoided narrow philosophical divisions of the human body and soul. Helm explains that Calvin’s anthropological model was a “complex picture” but that Calvin thought “such complexity ought to be passed over.”¹⁷ He explains further that, for Calvin, the Holy Spirit works upon the “minds and consciences” of men and women as they read Scripture.¹⁸ With respect to knowledge and reason, the use of the scriptural text demands noetic tools for using language such as vocabulary, syntax, and other related knowledge.¹⁹ Calvin states that this enlightening from the Holy Spirit is “a way superior to human Judgment.”²⁰ Yet, Calvin immediately explains that this means: “we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate.”²¹ This subjection or submission is intrinsic to faith.

15. Paul Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 68.

16. Van Den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*, 313.

17. Paul Helm references Calvin’s comments on anthropology in *Institutes* 1.15.6 in “Calvin and Philosophy,” in *Engaging with Calvin: Aspects of the Reformer’s Legacy for Today*, ed. Mark D. Thompson (Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos/InterVarsity Press, 2009), 70–71.

18. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 248.

19. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 256.

20. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

Théo Preiss calls this the “secret testimony” of the Spirit.²² Andrew McGowan cites Calvin on this matter and explains it this way: the Holy Spirit “enables us to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, through the enlightening of our minds.”²³ Faith, understanding, and reason are inseparable aspects of the work of the personal faculties as he or she becomes subject to God, who speaks through the Scriptures. Thus, the epistemic path is one of holistic personal evaluation that submits to God and in this believing has a certainty about what God is saying through the Scriptures. In sum, the epistemic circle moves through and involves the whole faculty of the person.

The subjectivity of the *testimonium* continues to be a source of debate. For example, Brucht Pranger claims that Calvin’s problem is “not so much the relationship between a reading subject and the object to be read as, rather the ‘objectivity’ of Scripture itself, that is, itself self-revelatory and self-referential nature.”²⁴ Pranger argues that the “price Calvin pays for this infallibility, for this seamless and all-pervasive presence of the Word is its absence.”²⁵ The claim that the Scripture is absent from Calvin’s thought and from Calvinism in general is strange indeed given the historical data. Pranger’s critical problem lies in the assertion that “Word is exchanged for Spirit without any urge to explain how one gets from one to the other, and how, if at all, the Word survives being confirmed by the Spirit.”²⁶ Here, Pranger misses the role of faith, knowledge, and understanding in the personal interaction with the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit. The “Word” survives and is not merely a ghost that is absorbed into the Holy Spirit. Despite its shortcomings, Pranger’s study is a helpful reminder that exclusive attention to either the Scripture (as text) or the Holy Spirit (as experience) is a ditch that lies alongside the *testimonium*.

When it comes to foundational authoritative sources of epistemology, circular argumentation cannot be avoided. Without considering

22. Théo Preiss, “The Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Scripture,” trans. Donald G. Miller, *Interpretation* 7 (1953): 261.

23. Andrew McGowan, “The Divine Spiration of Scripture,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21, 2 (2003): 216.

24. Burcht Pranger, “Calvin, Anselm and the Absent Bible,” in *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt*, eds. A. A. MacDonald, et al. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 458.

25. Pranger, “Calvin, Anselm and the Absent Bible,” 462.

26. Pranger, “Calvin, Anselm and the Absent Bible,” 461.

objective matters or *indicia*, we can see that the circularity of Calvin's logic is quite broad in scope. This contradicts Paul Helm's view that there is only "one step" needed in Calvin's view of ascertaining the authority of God in the Scriptures.²⁷ Helm is correct to stress the self-authenticating epistemology wherein God witnesses to God, but this action involves means that defy simplification.²⁸ This "step" must be carefully articulated and Calvin's thought is careful to avoid a process in which external evidences or *indicia* become elevated to the level of Scripture itself.²⁹ Because of the supernatural presence of the *person* of Holy Spirit, it is not even clear that this logic is circular. Perhaps the image of a circle could be replaced with an image that is more dialogical such as a three-dimensional spiral. Whatever the case, the circularity of Calvin's logic cannot be charged with being vicious.

Calvin's *testimonium* and Exegesis

The force of Calvin's argumentation and the very argument itself begs the question: what exegetical evidence in the "Word" of Scripture itself supports this doctrine? But this question does not seem to receive much attention. Older literature on the *testimonium* demonstrates that the matter of scriptural support for this doctrine was not always critically assessed.³⁰ Today, this can be confirmed by John Hesselink's comment (1997) that the two most common criticisms of Calvin's doctrine of the *testimonium* have to do with subjectivity and circularity—not its lack of exegetical support.³¹ Perhaps this lack of concern has more to do with narrow academic specialization that isolates historical theology from biblical exegesis. Whatever the case may be, there is little discussion about this matter. In this section, we

27. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 247, also 252. Perhaps the problem with Helm's statement about a "one step" process is the metaphor: it is difficult to picture steps with steps. I am supportive of using the metaphor of a large circle that encompasses several movements as opposed to a small circle with one movement.

28. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 247.

29. Van Den Belt states that, within Reformed orthodoxy, the *autopistia* of Scripture "became more and more independent because it was no longer intimately related to the *testimonium* of the Spirit." *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*, 312.

30. For examples, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 102; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 185–86.

31. I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Ky.: WJKP, 1997), 179–80.

will focus on the biblical evidence that Calvin uses to marshal his arguments for the *testimonium*.

The problem of Calvin's *testimonium* can be framed, albeit anachronistically, in terms of systematic theology versus biblical theology. For the sake of simplicity, I generally follow John Feinberg's definitions where systematic theology is a step away from divine revelation and consists of propositions that are descriptive and intentionally prescriptive.³² On the other hand, exegetical theology is an attempt to describe the primary text. Both tasks involve what Feinberg calls "human conceptual enterprise" or the use of human intellect.³³ But we must qualify this by stating that exegetical theology is based directly (as possible) on Scripture whereas systematic theology includes intentional steps that synthesize exegetical theology. We do not want to collapse exegesis into the text itself and we want to recognize the role of the intellect in all exegesis. This does not always work out neatly, but these two categories are helpful and indeed necessary for evaluating heresy and orthodoxy. These categories are also significant because of the relative weight given to each one.

For our purposes, exegetical theology is binding and authoritative because it simply reflects Scripture. It can carry the weight of the formula, "Thus says the Lord!" On the other hand, systematic theology is synthetic. Being synthetic, it may be used to support and integrate with exegetical theology. However, synthetic theology *cannot* carry the apologetic weight of being proclaimed in conjunction with the formula, "Thus says the Lord!"

The theological category that the doctrine of Calvin's *testimonium* is placed in is debated. Both Cole and Sproul take the position that Calvin's *testimonium* is either inferentially related to, or alluded to in Scripture.³⁴ By using the two categories described above, both Cole and Sproul view the *testimonium* as a systematic construct rather than an exegetically defensible statement. Cole explains that the *testimonium* is not "demanded by Scripture" even though it is "consistent with Scripture."³⁵ But this is not possible, at least according to Calvin's doctrine. Because the *testimonium* relies upon the Spirit testifying

32. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, xv.

33. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, xv.

34. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 273; Sproul, *Scripture Alone*, 115.

35. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 273.

through the Scripture, it cannot be said that the Spirit testifies apart from Scripture. John Leith points out that Calvin "vigorously refutes any notion that the Christian ever receives a revelation by the Spirit which is beyond or contradictory to the Bible."³⁶ Cole's position is that the *testimonium* is beyond the Bible in the sense that it is a systematic construction.

To argue that Scripture does not demand the *testimonium* is to completely and utterly negate its validity. If the *testimonium* is not demanded by Scripture, it does not stand at all. If the *testimonium* is the product of human conceptual enterprise, how is it that we can be sure it is the Holy Spirit who is testifying to us about the authority of Scripture? The essence of the doctrine is a variation of the formula, "Thus says the Lord." Perhaps we might say it is "Thus says the Spirit" or "Thus says the Spirit of the Lord."

The whole question of exegetical support for the *testimonium* rests on proving two points. First, Calvin must demonstrate that the Scripture claims to speak for God or "write with divine authority."³⁷ Second, he must demonstrate that the Holy Spirit works experientially inside people to provide them with certainty of the Scripture's authority. In other words, the Scripture must say that it is God's words and that God Himself will bear witness to them. Here I will examine four passages that Calvin references in the seventh chapter of the *Institutes* and draw some observations about his exegesis. There are four biblical texts explicitly cited in this section (Eph. 2:20; Isa. 43:10, 54:13, and 59:21). Calvin does not really exegete any passage; his handling of them is more of an exposition than exegesis. He treats them as clearly supporting his argumentation with little explanation.

The first biblical text is Ephesians 2:20 ("[The church is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets"). This text is used in a *via negativa* argument: the church cannot have possessed "certainty" because the church appeared after the apostles and prophets.³⁸ This is a defensive argument against the Roman Catholic doctrine that established the church as the foundation for the authority of Scripture. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church argued that Scripture

36. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 63.

37. Richard A. Muller notes this argumentation was held by "Calvin and by the later Protestant orthodox" in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Two: Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 50.

38. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.2.

was authoritative because it gave it this authority, Calvin argued that Ephesians 2:20 ruled this out. This is not merely about canonicity because Calvin explicitly connects this issue to the question: “How shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the Church?”³⁹ The Roman Church, or any church, for that matter, is not able to stand in judgment over the canonicity or authority of Scripture. Calvin develops a more direct argument for the *testimonium* now that he has preempted any objections based on ecclesiastical authority. The Isaianic texts are more critical for Calvin’s argument and they serve as the focal point for his logic.

Calvin demonstrates the first point: Scripture claims to speak for God by referring to Isaiah 59:21. Calvin quotes the entire verse: “My Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever.”⁴⁰ Thus, Isaiah is claiming to write with the divine authority of Yahweh. Calvin simply says of this passage: “Scripture [is] carrying its own evidence along with it.”⁴¹ Calvin extrapolates Isaiah’s reference to the “Spirit” of Yahweh working in Isaiah the prophet to all human authors of Scripture. The words of the prophet were the words that Holy Spirit gave (inspired) him to write. This is interpreted holistically and applied theologically to all of Scripture: it fulfills the requirement that the Scripture must explicitly state that it is from God.

Calvin demonstrates the second point: that Scripture identifies the Holy Spirit as witnessing internally by referring to Isaiah 43:10 and 54:13. He quotes these passages and he seems to rely upon their clarity without detailed exegesis from original languages or lengthy exposition. In Isaiah 43:10, Calvin points to God’s stated provision of knowledge, belief, and understanding: “Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he.”⁴² Next, by quoting Isaiah 54:13, Calvin argues, “the children of the renovated Church ‘shall be taught of the Lord.’”⁴³ This text is applied theologically and Christologically to the church so that all members of the church invisible

39. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.2.

40. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

41. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

42. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

43. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

have the Spirit working internally to teach them about the Spirit's own words in Scripture.

Earlier, the problem of Calvin's motivation was raised by Henk Van Den Belt who suggests that "Calvin's main motive to emphasize the self-convincing character of Scripture lies in his existential desire for divine certainty."⁴⁴ This is a problem because in Calvin's logic, the *testimonium* only has authority if it is derived from Scripture. The Scripture itself must be the *main* motive behind the doctrine if it is to stand the test of logical coherence. Undoubtedly, there are many motives at work in the mind of any writer; but it is highly speculative to engage in a psychological analysis by attempting to go behind the text. Even if Calvin himself were to have stated this as his main motivation, I am not convinced that modern psychologists would accept it. Van Den Belt's speculation is a contemporary example of the tradition of reading Calvin in psychological and existential categories.⁴⁵ It remains highly speculative and, given Calvin's own writings, it is not likely that he would accept it as his main motivation for articulating the doctrine of the *testimonium*. This is because it places himself, rather than Scripture, as the main source for motivation. Van Den Belt's work is rigorous and I believe that this may have been an oversight on his part. Nevertheless, the psychological analysis tradition is strong enough to warrant some discussion.

If there is any difficulty with Calvin's *testimonium*, it does not lie in its logic or subjectivity but in his theological interpretation. Calvin's exegesis—or exposition, to be more accurate—makes three hermeneutical moves that have not received much attention. This is not surprising because they remain in the background and are not explicitly identified in the chapter on the *testimonium*. First, the move from Israel to the church is based on the continuity within the covenant of grace structure. The covenant of grace creates continuity between Israel and the church as the people of God who have access to Yahweh. Second, the extrapolation from the Holy Spirit's work in Isaiah

44. Van Den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*, 309.

45. Richard A. Muller is highly critical of psychological and existential interpretations of Calvin in *The Accommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 79–98, esp. 97. For another discussion of psychological analysis, see I. John Hesselink, "Reactions to Bouwisma's Portrait of 'John Calvin,'" *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 209–213.

as the author of Scripture to all authors of Scripture is complex. This relationship assumes a fixed canon so that it is clear which Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit. In spite of lengthy discussion in this commentary, it is surprising that Calvin does not refer to 2 Timothy 3:16 to support the theological position that all Scripture is inspired in the same way as Isaiah. It is purely conjecture, but it may be that Calvin was studying Isaiah at the same time he was writing this section of the *Institutes*. Third, the *testimonium* is integrally related to the doctrine of illumination. Grant Osborne explains that the *testimonium* relates to one's acceptance of the authority of Scripture whereas illumination relates to "understanding that Word."⁴⁶ Thus, God must provide illumination in the person's faculties to understand the very texts that testify to its authority. In sum, the difficulty with the *testimonium* is that there are several unstated assumptions at work in Calvin's theological interpretation of the book of Isaiah. These issues provide potential areas for further scholarship and exploration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Graham Cole succinctly summarizes the problem of the *testimonium* when he states that it is not clear "how he [Calvin] justifies his move."⁴⁷ In this study, we see that Calvin justifies his move through circular logic that is robust enough to cover the complexities of the personhood of the reader and the personhood of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin, the *testimonium* is demanded by Scripture and is not the product of a human conceptual enterprise.

46. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 436.

47. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 273.