

Calvin on the Work of the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts

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Preface: The Word of God and the Spirit of God:

The Reformed Tradition which both represents and reflects the Presbyterian churches all over the world is often described as the faith tradition of the “Word of God.” As a result, the Presbyterian churches deem highly the preaching in the worship, the regulation of the word of God in the daily lives of the faithful, and the rational statements and arguments that we often heard during various meetings of its governing bodies. Such emphasis on the “Word of God” provides an indelible impression that the Presbyterian churches are “rational, plausible, cognitive and orderly.” John Calvin even claims that there should be a “rational” element in all prayers: “...either in public prayer or in private, the tongue without the mind must be highly displeasing to God.”

Recently, the Charismatic movements had created a tremendous impact on the global churches—especially the churches in the “two-third worlds.” These emergent, grass-rooted movements exhibited a faith pattern that can be designated as emphasizing and focusing on the “Spirit of God.” During the last 50 years, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have rapidly reinvented Christianity and redefined and even reshaped the physical map and the existential characteristic of the World Christianity. Of course, such emphasis on the “Spirit of God” often rendered a stereotyped impression of a “disorderly, experiential, emotional and impulsive” faith expression.

However, as we probably would all agree, there is a strong emphasis on the interactive connection and balance between the Word and Spirit of God within the Reformed Tradition. In a true sense, we could argue that there is “Word within the Spirit” and “Spirit within the Word” (II Cor. 3.6-8). When discussing about the “Fanatics, Abandoning Scripture and Flying Over to Revelation, Cast Down the Principles of Godliness” in Chapter IX, First Book of the *Institutes*, Calvin first proposes the basic principle of “The Holy Spirit is recognized in his agreement with Scripture.” Then he emphasizes the concept of “Word and Spirit belong inseparably together.” In his own words:

“For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who caused us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace

the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.”

Once we realize the close relationship between the Word and Spirit of God, it will shed significant light on the life of the church today. For example, the preaching in our worship today has become very formalized and often focused too much on experience and thus lost the empowering impact of the “Word of God.” Hence, it is with the enlightening and renewing of the Spirit of God that the Word of God may carry convincing and life-transforming power. In a similar way, the Charismatic movements often neglected the Word of God to the extent of focusing primarily and often exclusively on the gifts and power of the Spirit while overlooking the Person and Work of the same Spirit. It is with the teaching and regulation of the Word that the Spirit may exert an enlivening, empowering and renewing power.

For Calvin, the Word and the Spirit of God are the two pillars of the Christian life. Be it the interpreting and preaching of the Bible, the administering of the Sacraments, the disciplining and structuring of the Christian life, or the praxis of the Christian mission and witness in the world, all aspects of churches’ lives have to be implemented within the balancing and interlinking relationship between the Word and Spirit of God. Moreover, the “internal witness” of the Spirit to the Word of God and the grand vision of the “Kingdom of God” that it furnished and mandated for the church have to be emphasized again and again.

In the mid-1950s B.B. Warfield, the prominent Reformed theologian, already pointed out that Calvin is “preeminently *the theologian of the Holy Spirit.*” Indeed, to Warfield, Calvin’s “greatest contribution to the theological science lies in the rich development which he gives—and which he was the first to give—to the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit” and it is in Calvin’s hands that this doctrine “for the first time in the history of the Church... comes to its rights.” Warfield thus concludes, “it is the sense of the sovereign working of salvation by the almighty power of the Holy Spirit which characterizes all Calvin’s thought of God.” In recently years, I. John Hesselink, Jr., another prominent Reformed theologian, also maintains that if we want to find a most adequate designation for Calvin, it should be “Theologian of the Holy Spirit.”

In this paper, I will discuss Calvin’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit through his writings in the *Institutes* and Commentaries. I will also introduce Prof. Hesselink and other Reformed theologians’ main ideas on Calvin’s Theology

of the Holy Spirit. At the end I will examine Calvin's views on spiritual gifts as is reflected in his commentaries and explore their modern significance.