

# JOHN CALVIN ON THE QUESTION OF NATURAL LIGHT

One of the important doctrines maintained by Reformed believers is the doctrine of natural light—i.e. what does natural man know in his sin-darkened state?

Article 4, Canons III-IV, says,

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

More than fifty years earlier Calvin had written concerning this same doctrine in his exposition of John 1:9-10, "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not."

The following is the exposition of John Calvin.

"The Evangelist was not contrasting the true light with a false; he wanted to differentiate Christ from all others lest any should think that He was what is called light in common with angels or men. The difference is that heavenly and earthly light has only a derivative brightness; but Christ is light, reflecting from Himself and through Himself and thence shining brightly upon the whole world. There is no other source or cause of its brightness anywhere. And so he calls Him the true light whose own nature is to be light.

*"Which lighteth every man.* The Evangelist emphasizes this that we may learn that Christ is the light from the effect which each of us feels in himself. He could have argued more subtly that inasmuch as Christ is eternal light, He has native and underived brightness. But instead, he recalls us to the experience we all have. For, since Christ makes us all partakers of His brightness, it must be acknowledged that to Him alone accords strictly the dignity of being called light. For the rest, the verse is

commonly explained in one of two ways. Some limit the universal term to those who, begotten again by the Spirit of God, are made partakers of the life-giving light. Augustine uses the simile of a schoolmaster who, if his is the only school in the town, will be called the master of all even though many do not attend his school. Therefore, they regard this phrase relatively: all are enlightened by Christ, since none can boast that he has obtained the light of life otherwise than through His grace. But as the Evangelist mentions in general 'every man coming into the world', I prefer the other meaning—that beams from this light are shed upon the whole race of men, as I said before. For we know that men have this unique quality above the other animals, that they are endowed with reason and intelligence and that they bear the distinction between right and wrong engraven in their conscience. Thus there is no man to whom some awareness of the eternal light does not penetrate. But, since fanatics eagerly seize on this verse and twist it into saying that the grace of illumination is offered to all without distinction, let us remember that it is only referring to the common light of nature, a far lowlier thing than faith. For no man will penetrate into the kingdom of God by the cleverness and perspicuity of his own mind; the Spirit of God alone opens the gate of heaven to His elect. Moreover, we must remember that the light of reason which God imparted to men has been so darkened by sin that scarcely a few meagre sparks still shine unquenched in this intense darkness or rather dreadful ignorance and abyss of errors.

*"He was in the world.* He accuses the men of ingratitude in that they were, so to say, voluntarily blinded; blinded in such a way that they did not know how the light they enjoyed was caused. And this is true of every age. Even before Christ was manifest in the flesh he revealed His power everywhere. Therefore those daily effects ought to correct men's sluggishness; for what could be more unreasonable than to draw water from a running stream and never think of the stream it flows from? Accordingly, the world cannot plead ignorance as a legitimate excuse for not knowing Christ before He was manifest in the flesh. For it came from slackness and a sort of malignant dulness in those who always had Him present in His power. The sum of it is that Christ was never so absent from the world that men ought not to have been awakened by His rays and to have looked up to Him. Whence it follows that they are guilty."

(quoted from *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*,  
St. John, p. 14-16)