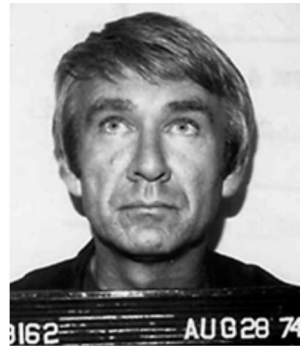


CONCERNING FALSE PROPHETS



AND THE ABUSE OF REVELATION

BY

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*"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."
1 John 4:1*

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A generalization about religious belief to which there are, I believe, few exceptions is this: The more confident one is in one's religious beliefs, the more willing one is to subject those beliefs to careful scrutiny; the less confident one is in them – the more one unconsciously fears that they cannot withstand such scrutiny – the more eager one is to find a device that would appear to protect them from careful scrutiny. And, more often than not, such a protective device will include an assault upon human reason.

Now I have no desire to glorify human reason. Some of the most careless thinkers I have known, and even some of the most irrational, have worshiped at the shrine of human reason. We have no choice, however, but to employ the faculties we have when we "test the spirits to see whether they are of God"; indeed, only by reasoning carefully can we exhibit the limits of reason itself. That is also why an all-out assault upon human reason inevitably undermines and defeats itself: If we cannot trust our reasoning powers at all, then neither can we trust the specific reasoning that supposedly exhibits the limits of reason itself.

When religious people emphasize the limits of human reason, moreover, they sometimes draw the wrong moral. They may begin with some true observations about the finite character of our human minds, the historically conditioned character of much of our reasoning, the lofty and mysterious character of God, or perhaps even the corrupting power of moral evil or sin. But instead of concluding, as they should, that a loving God, who understands our limitations better than we do, would never require more of human reason than it can deliver, they draw a very different moral: namely, that we must set aside our critical faculties altogether and blindly accept some proposition that, according to the best judgment we can muster at the time, seems unworthy of human belief or perhaps even morally repugnant. In an effort to get us to accept such a proposition, they may also identify a humble submission to God with an uncritical submission to some tradition or some sacred text that either endorses, or appears to endorse, the proposition in question. But only a false prophet, I want to suggest, would ask us to accept some proposition, however true, despite the fact that it seems to us, for whatever reason, to be unworthy of human belief.

A false prophet is someone who speaks falsely in the name of God, and here I shall be concerned with a particular kind of false prophet: one who, more often than not, comes in the name of orthodoxy. The false prophets I have in mind are those who use the Bible (or some other sacred text) as a weapon of fear, or as part of an assault upon reason and good sense. At one time or another, they have appealed to the Bible in defense of slavery, racism, the exploitation of women, the burning at the stake of young women (charged with witchcraft), the murder of heretics, and even protracted torture. We find it easy today, perhaps, to appreciate the specious character of at least some of these appeals. But we can also imagine how easily such appeals might confuse a simple peasant farmer who believes fervently that he must bow before the Scriptures. There is perhaps no better way to confuse him and to persuade him to ignore his own conscience than to spout Scripture at him. For if God says something, he will reason, then it must be true, however morally repugnant or logically absurd it may appear to us as fallible human beings. Or, as a bumper sticker I once saw put it: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." If you can get someone to accept the first statement, the rest is inevitable.

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The Parable of Morg and Nivlac

Consider the following parable:

Long ago in ancient Atlantis, a series of prophets appeared among the Atlantans and spoke in the name of Morg, whom they proclaimed as the one true God of the universe. In the name of Morg, these prophets performed many mighty deeds: They healed the sick, brought sight to the blind, and even raised a few men and women from the dead. They spoke with great power and authority, preaching absolute obedience to Morg, whose holy and just character, they said, could not tolerate wicked disobedience. They called for economic justice, for peaceful relationships between the states, for children to obey their parents and parents to love their children, and for the people to engage in certain prescribed forms of worship. They also produced many writings: letters, sermons, historical accounts, and the like; and in later centuries, these were collected into a set of sacred scriptures called, The Book of Morg. Though the scriptures included a rich variety of religious writings, not all of which were easy to harmonize, converts to Morgism nonetheless came to regard them all as the inerrant word of Morg.

Now the Atlantans were generally a dark-skinned people, but it so happened that about one in five was albino, totally devoid of any skin pigmentation. There was no discernible pattern to this phenomenon. An albino parent was no more likely than a dark-skinned parent to have an albino child; and though approximately 20% of the population was albino, no one could predict when an albino child would be born. But the Book of Morg had some important things to say about this phenomenon; certain texts seemed to imply that white skin was an abomination in the sight of Morg. To be sure, the interpretation of these texts, sometimes classified among the "hard sayings," was controversial, in part because they seemed incompatible with other texts. But Azeb 8:22 explicitly used the term "abomination," and many other texts seemed to imply that albinos would have no place in the Kingdom of Morg. According to Morgist fundamentalists, therefore, there was no salvation for albinos; and so the fundamentalists excluded albinos from the holy temples, and they supported laws against intermarriage between albinos and the dark-skinned majority.

As you might expect, however, these practices produced some great theological controversies. Those whom the fundamentalists castigated as liberals pointed to other texts in the book of Morg that seemed to declare Morg's love for all Atlantans; they even pointed out that, according to Epaga 13:5, there are no color distinctions at all in the Kingdom of Morg. And philosophers among the more liberal party supplemented these exegetical considerations with the following philosophical argument: If Morg is truly holy and just, they contended – and if his very essence is perfect love – then he could not possibly hate the albinos and exclude them from his Kingdom simply on account of their white skin. But the fundamentalists had a whole arsenal of arguments against such considerations as these. They found some fifty texts in the Book of Morg in which the word "all" did not literally mean all, and they therefore argued that the more universalistic-sounding texts imply only that Morg loves all Atlantans of color. After all, one must harmonize one text with another. If there are no color distinctions in the Kingdom of Morg, for example, that is only because the albinos have already been excluded. The fundamentalists also responded with great anger towards the more philosophical arguments: The liberals, they claimed, had elevated human reason above the Book of Morg, which should be the ultimate standard of truth. But the liberals had no right to judge

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Morg; it was Morg who would eventually judge them.

And so the controversies raged among the Morgists until Nivlac, the greatest exegete and theologian of Atlantis, put an end to all such controversies by the power of the sword - which, he claimed, Morg had placed in his hand. According to Nivlac, Morg did not hate the albinos on account of anything they had done, good or bad; he did not even hate them on account of their white skin. To the contrary, their white skin was but a visible sign that Morg had already hated them from the foundation of the world. Against the liberal party, "venomous dogs who spew out more than one kind of venom against Morg," Nivlac wrote:

Foolish men contend with Morg in many ways, as though they held him liable to their accusations. They first ask, therefore, by what right Morg becomes angry at his creatures who have not provoked him by any previous offense; for to devote albinos to destruction just because it pleases him is more like the caprice of a tyrant than the lawful sentence of a judge. It therefore seems to them that albinos have reason to expostulate with Morg if they are hated solely by his decision, apart from their own merit. If thoughts of this kind ever occur to pious men, they will be sufficiently armed to break their force by the one consideration that it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of Morg's will.

And so ends our parable.

A question many might have about it is this: If certain texts in the Book of Morg really did contain such a horrendous doctrine about the albinos, why did so many Morgists regard the book as an infallible revelation nonetheless? Why did they not just throw out the objectionable parts? One answer might be that most of them had learned about Morg in the first place by reading the Book of Morg, and they did not feel it right simply to pick and choose what they would, and would not, believe. They regarded the entire book as the holy Word of Morg, and they denied themselves any authority to stand in judgment upon the veracity of this text or that. As we hinted when telling the story, alternative interpretations of the crucial texts were indeed possible. But what could a simple peasant, who knew little of the book's historical background and nothing of the languages in which it was originally written, have to say on that score? How could a simple peasant controvert the opinion of so great a scholar as Nivlac on the meaning of a specific text? So long as the less learned considered it impious to question the authority of scripture, therefore, Nivlac could employ his greater learning as a club to beat them into submission. His superior knowledge of history and the languages of scripture and his more sophisticated exegetical arguments made him, for all practical purposes, the final arbiter of all truth – not just the truth in the area of his own specialty, but of all truth.

There is, of course, a way in which even a simple peasant could have undermined all of Nivlac's pretensions. Suppose that a peasant woman should have approached him and have said something like this: "Look, Nivlac, I love Morg with all my heart, and I believe that the Book of Morg is indeed his holy Word. And I don't know what to say about your fancy arguments that seem to imply such awful things about Morg. But I do know this. No holy or just or loving Creator like Morg, no Creator of the kind that I worship, could possibly hate this little albino child of mine that I love so much. Indeed, if he loves me, as you say he does, then he must also love my baby. So if you are right about the meaning of these verses – mind you, I'm not saying you are right – but IF you are right, then

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these verses are just wrong; they are not a true revelation from Morg." By her simple willingness to hold onto certain convictions even on the assumption that they contradict the Book of Morg, or contradict certain texts in the Book of Morg, such a peasant woman would have nullified every advantage that Nivlac's superior knowledge of history and language might otherwise have given him. All of his railing about wicked disobedience, about substituting her own human judgment for Morg's, about making accusations against Morg would then simply pass her by. For as even a simple peasant woman could see, there is no question here of making accusations against Morg. Her bone of contention, as we have imagined it, was with Nivlac, not with Morg.

A Religious Assault on Reason and Good Sense

Now consider the following bit of history:

In his effort to harmonize and systematize various passages in the Bible, John Calvin drew the inference that, according to the Bible as a whole, God restricts his love and mercy to a chosen few; indeed, even before the foundation of the world, God had already predestined some persons to eternal perdition. Calvin calls this the doctrine of reprobation; and though his critics have always insisted that such a doctrine is inconsistent with God's love and justice, they have not always been up to the task of challenging his exegesis. That is particularly true of the Christian laity, who sometimes find themselves in a position similar to that of our peasant woman above: Lacking both the background and the learning to challenge Calvin's exegetical arguments, they nonetheless find his interpretations deeply disturbing; though not scholars, in other words, they can still recognize an injustice when they hear it. So how does Calvin reply to these earnest Christians who would dare to raise a question about divine justice? Well, against "these venomous dogs" who "spew out more than one kind of venom against God," Calvin writes:

Foolish men contend with God in many ways, as though they held him liable to their accusations. They first ask, therefore, by what right the Lord becomes angry at his creatures who have not provoked him by any previous offense; for to devote to destruction whomever he pleases is more like the caprice of a tyrant than the lawful sentence of a judge. It therefore seems to them that men have reason to expostulate with God if they are predestined to eternal death solely by his decision, apart from their own merit [my emphasis]. If thoughts of this kind ever occur to pious men, they will be sufficiently armed to break their force by the one consideration that it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will (Institutes, Bk. III, Ch. XXIII, Sec. 2).

Calvin goes on to make two additional points: first, that God's will is the highest rule of righteousness, and second, that there is nothing, not even God's own character or nature, to which his will is bound (see below). Calvin then concludes with this statement: "But we deny that he [God] is liable to render an account; we also deny that we are competent judges to pronounce judgment in this cause according to our own understanding" (Ibid.).

Now it is the form of Calvin's reply to the objection, not his interpretation of the Bible, that I want to examine here. It seems clear that he understood the objection; he understood it well enough to state it with considerable force, and he no doubt felt the force of his own statement. It also seems clear that he had no answer to the objection; that is, as he would have acknowledged himself, the

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doctrine in question does appear repugnant when judged "according to our own understanding." When so judged, moreover, the objection seems clear and decisive; we are not here dealing, that is, with a matter that seems utterly beyond our ken. Some questions – for example, "What will life really be like beyond the grave?" – no doubt are beyond our present ability to answer. With respect to such a question as this, we recognize that, if there is life beyond the grave, we have no clear conception of what it will be like. But other questions, even questions about almighty God, seem not to touch upon any mystery at all – for example:

(1) Would a loving and just God have commanded that we torture babies simply for our own sadistic pleasure?

(2) Would a loving and just God have predestined some, "apart from their own merit," to eternal torment?

Far from finding the answer to these questions difficult or mysterious, we seem to have a clear and decisive answer to them. For each of the questions describes something that fits the very paradigm of an unloving and an unjust action; to answer either in the affirmative, therefore, would seem to empty the terms "loving" and "just" of all meaning. Nor does Calvin himself ever deny this. Instead, he writes: "But we deny that they [who are predestined to eternal perdition] are duly excused, because the ordinance of God, by which they complain that they are destined for destruction, has its own equity [or justice] – unknown, indeed, to us but very sure" (Institutes, Bk. III, Ch. XXIII, Sec. 9).

So Calvin in effect concedes that his own doctrine cannot withstand close scrutiny; at least it cannot withstand such scrutiny when judged "according to our own understanding." He therefore tries to protect his doctrine from such scrutiny, and he does so in three different ways: (i) by identifying objections to it with "accusations" against God; (ii) by insisting that those who raise such objections are "very wicked"; and (iii) by denying that we can judge the matter "according to our own understanding."

A Critical Response

Let us now consider each of Calvin's moves more carefully. His first move – which identifies objections to his doctrine with accusations against God – is truly unfortunate, particularly when one considers how many simple and honest Christians have found some of his doctrines disturbing. Such Christians may have a bone to pick with Calvin, but they are not making accusations against God; they may even see themselves as defending God against an unfair caricature. But it is a curious thing with Calvin: As anyone who browses his *Institutes* will quickly discover, he typically ascribes the worst possible motives to those who would dare to disagree with him; again and again, he dismisses perfectly reasonable questions about God's justice as if those who would raise them were wicked persons making wicked accusations against God.

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Nor is Calvin's second move much better than the first. Why should anyone think it "very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will"? Presumably the cause (or ground) of God's will, where such exists, lies in his own nature, which provides him with reasons for acting and, in some cases at least, explains why certain reasons are decisive for him. To reflect upon the cause (or ground) of God's will, therefore, is merely to reflect upon the nature of God. And why should any believer think it wicked to do that? Is it wicked to believe, for example, that God's loving nature would preclude him from commanding cruelty for its own sake? By way of a reply, Calvin gives, I would note, not a biblical argument, but a confused philosophical argument. He writes:

... it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will. For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are. For if it has any cause, something must precede it, to which it is, as it were, bound; this is unlawful to imagine. For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's rashness, then, restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist . . . (Institutes, Bk. III, Ch. XXIII, Sec. 2).

At the beginning of this passage, Calvin points out, quite rightly, that as "the cause of all things that are," God is neither a created being nor dependent upon causal conditions external to himself; so clearly, no external conditions causally determine his will. In that respect, God is perhaps the freest of all beings. It simply does not follow, however, that God never has decisive reasons, grounded in his own nature, for willing one way rather than another; neither does it follow that the question, "Why does God will thus?" is one to which an answer "cannot be found" because it "does not exist" at all. It follows only that, if God does have a nature which provides him with decisive reasons for willing one way rather than another, it is an uncreated nature. If God's will is anything more than sheer caprice, moreover, then his eternal and uncreated nature is indeed "greater and higher than" his will and something "to which it is, as it were, bound." For consider the statement in I John 4:8 & 16 that "God is love," and suppose, for a moment, that we take this to imply that it is God's very nature to love. If it is God's very nature to love, then his will is bound by his love, which would permit him to will certain things and prevent him from willing others. So again I ask: Where is the impiety in believing that? – or the wickedness in exploring a matter such as that?

So far, then, we have found nothing of substance in Calvin's first two moves, and we are thus left with his third move: His claim that we cannot judge the doctrine of reprobation "according to our own understanding." But just what is it, according to Calvin, that lies beyond our understanding? Is it God's motive for causing some to become reprobate? Not at all. For Calvin identifies the relevant motive himself; he attributes the reprobation of Esau, for example, to God's hatred for Esau and to the sovereignty of God's wrath.

"For as Jacob, deserving nothing by good works, is taken into grace, so Esau, as yet undefiled by any crime, is hated" (Institutes, Bk. III, Ch. XXII, Sec. 11).

And again:

"Let readers note that Paul[?], to cast off occasion for whispering and disparagement gives the ultimate sovereignty to God's wrath and might" (Bk.III, Ch.XXIII, Sec.1)

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According to Calvin, moreover, God's hatred of Esau in no way rests upon his knowledge of what Esau would do, either in the future or in other possible circumstances. From the beginning, therefore, God willed that Esau should come to a bad end; hence God does not now, and never did, will the good for him. A motive such as hatred, however, hardly lies beyond our own understanding. If Calvin had said that God loved Esau – that is, willed the good for him – and nonetheless predestined him to a bad end, we would indeed have found that impossible to understand. But the idea that a hateful and wrathful god – one in whom wrath, not love, is sovereign – should predestine someone to a bad end, even to eternal torment, is hardly difficult to understand. So again I ask: Just what is it, according to Calvin, that lies beyond our understanding?

Is it perhaps God's justice or righteousness? Not at all. For though Calvin says that God's justice is "unknown, indeed, to us," he turns right around and gives a full explanation of it. He makes two assumptions: first, that "God's will is . . . the highest rule of righteousness [or justice, so] that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous," and second, that nothing, not even a loving or merciful nature, is "greater and higher than God's will." And lest there should be any doubt concerning the second assumption, Calvin clarifies it this way: If you raise the question, "Why has God willed thus?" – or, as in the case of God's will for Esau, "Why does he act from hatred rather than from love?" – "you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found" because it "does not exist" at all. From these assumptions it follows that God could will anything whatsoever, and whatever he wills would be righteous or just. It also follows, as Calvin himself acknowledges in the passages quoted above, that nothing in God's nature precludes his acting from genuine hatred for – that is, a desire ultimately to harm – some created persons. And from all of this it likewise follows that God could justly predestine some persons to eternal torment.

So once again, for all of his appeal to mystery and the limits of human understanding, Calvin in fact leaves nothing to mystery. His explanation of divine justice is complete, and it gives him the result he wants. The only problem is that his assumptions also undermine the Christian faith entirely, because they undermine the very possibility of trust in God. If God can "justly" do anything whatsoever, including predestine some to eternal perdition, then he can also "justly" engage in cruelty for its own sake, "justly" command that we torture babies or that we produce as much misery in the world as we can, and "justly" punish acts of love and kindness. So why should we even care whether God is just or righteous if his righteousness excludes nothing at all? And on what grounds can we trust him? If, as Calvin claims, there is no answer to the question, "Why does God act from one set of motives (e.g. love) rather than from another (e.g., hatred or deceitfulness), then nothing in God's nature precludes him from lying or breaking promises or deceiving all Christians regarding the conditions of salvation. Indeed, for all we know, perhaps God has deceived all Christians regarding the conditions of salvation in order that he might display the true nature of his righteousness.

Nor will it help to say at this point that, though God does have a nature, it lies entirely beyond our human understanding or comprehension. For trust in God can have but one possible foundation: Our knowledge of and confidence in the nature of God. So long as we can believe that it is God's very nature to love and that his love will eventually triumph, we can leave the rest to mystery. But if we cannot believe this--if we believe instead that it is entirely possible (and just as probable as not in the ultimate scheme of things) that God hates us – then we shall find ourselves in the same tortured position as those Calvinists who agonize over their own election, looking pitifully for signs of it in their

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own good works. For unless we can be confident that it is God's nature to love everyone, we can never have a well-grounded confidence that he in fact loves us.

Testing the Spirits

We have seen that, according to Calvin, "it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will" and hence very wicked to reflect upon the nature of God. In this way, Calvin tried to protect one of his own doctrines, the doctrine of reprobation, from careful scrutiny. He in effect granted that the message of the Bible, as he understood it, is in a fundamental conflict with human reason ("our own understanding"); but he rejected even the clearest deliverances of human reason on the supposed ground that they conflict with the message of the Bible. He thus elevated not the Bible in all of its richness, complexity, and diversity, but his own interpretation of it, above even the clearest deliverances of human reason.

Now I think it appropriate, at this point, to raise some rather basic questions. For suppose that Calvin's interpretation of the texts upon which he rests his doctrine of reprobation were exegetically correct. Would that not merely prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that these texts are something less than an infallible revelation from God? I fully appreciate how scandalous some contemporary Calvinists are apt to find such a suggestion. But why should anyone accept the authority of the Bible, or of some text within it, regardless of what the text teaches? Why should I accept the authority of Jesus or Paul, for example, regardless of what they say? If I exhibit such slavish devotion as that, then I ultimately demean the very authority I am seeking to honor; I say in effect that I would believe the Bible even if it were filled with bald faced lies. Many who accept the Bible as a religious authority do so because, as they see it, they have found within it something worthy of human belief; something that inspires the soul and elevates the mind; something that, though it may shatter their preconceptions on occasion, always does so in the lofty way Jesus does when he teaches that we must love our enemies as well as our friends (see Matthew 5:44). If Christians are entitled to regard a text as authoritative for such reasons as these, do they not also have a responsibility to question a text whose teaching seems morally repugnant or unworthy of human belief? Such questioning need not, of course, imply an outright rejection of the text in question. But it will rest upon an implicit disjunction: Either we have misunderstood the text in question, or its teaching is not an infallible revelation from God.

Lest some Christians should consider such questioning impious, I would also point out that certain texts in the New Testament itself seem to endorse this very kind of questioning. In I John 4:1 we read: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." The injunction here seems to apply far beyond the immediate context in which it appears; it seems to apply to every spirit, every supposed prophet, every sacred text, and even to the letter of I John itself. Must we not test all of these things, with whatever reason is available to us, to see whether they really are from God? False prophets and demonic spirits will always, I want to suggest, reveal their true character in the end; they will do so, as many recent cult leaders have illustrated, by asking that we set aside our own better judgment and submit to an untested authority of some kind. The one thing they will not (and cannot) allow is independent judgment. They will therefore rail against "autonomous human reason" and appeal to

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mystery and to the limits of our own understanding in an effort to prevent us from assessing some matter that even given our limited understanding, we are quite competent to assess.

Calvin's defense of his doctrine of reprobation illustrates the point nicely. His statement of the doctrine is clear; the implications of the doctrine for the divine nature are clear; and, as we saw in the previous section, his account of divine justice is complete and gives him the result he wants. Everything he says about the matter falls well within the limits of our human understanding; it is something we can reason about and are quite competent to assess. His appeal to mystery and to the limits of human understanding, therefore, is little more than a subterfuge, an effort to get us to set aside our own better judgment.

Consider also how different Calvin's appeal to mystery is from that which we find in the Bible itself. Whereas Calvin appeals to mystery in an effort to prepare us for a doctrine almost too fearful and too terrible to contemplate, the Bible never appeals to mystery, so far as I have been able to find, except in a redemptive context so wondrous and so glorious that it literally boggles the mind. As an illustration, consider two texts: Romans 11:33, where Paul exclaims: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" and Isaiah 55:8-9, where we read: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Though Calvin cites Romans 11:33 (several times) in an effort to sidestep obvious objections to his doctrine of reprobation, he never once in the *Institutes* considers either this text or Isaiah 55:8-9 in its own context. So let us consider the context.

Do either of these texts, when taken in their own context, imply that we cannot profitably meditate on God's ways, or understand their point, or appreciate the rationale behind them? Quite the contrary. The context of the Isaiah passage clarifies exactly how God's ways are higher than ours: In verses 6 and 7 we read that, if the wicked will but return to God, he will have mercy upon them and "abundantly pardon" them. That is the precise sense in which, according to the text, God's ways are higher than ours: Such mercy and forgiveness as he displays are utterly foreign to our natural patterns of thought and to our ordinary ways of doing things. So the point is not merely that God's thoughts and ways are an impenetrable mystery, though they are indeed mysterious in just the lofty way we would expect. The point is that God is more merciful and forgiving than we are. It is an altogether balanced view. From one perspective, God's mercy and forgiveness may seem incomprehensibly wonderful; but from another, they will seem altogether befitting a being who is worthy of praise, thanksgiving, and worship. And that is exactly the point that Paul makes as well. What triggers Paul's ecstatic praise is the thought that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, God's mercy literally extends to all (see 11:32). We may not understand how this could be, how even God's severity towards the disobedient could be an expression of mercy towards them, but that is precisely the mystery, I would argue, that Paul unfolds for us in the eleventh chapter of Romans. It is a mystery that lifts our hearts and again seems altogether befitting a being worthy of our praise and adoration.

That Calvin should wrench Romans 11:33 from its own context – one of hope – and force it into a very different context – one of fear – tells us something important about his method of exegesis. But that, as I said above, is not my present concern. The question I have asked is this: Do we not have every right, perhaps even a solemn obligation, to follow our own reasoning and better judgment – that is,

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the best judgment we are capable of – as we test the spirits and the claims of various prophets? Do we not have a solemn obligation to reject any doctrine that appears, the more carefully we examine it, morally repugnant to us? If we should happen to make a mistake and reject a true doctrine thereby, God can always reveal to us a perspective from which the doctrine will no longer appear morally repugnant. But if we try to accept a doctrine even though it deeply offends our moral sense, we then run the risk of jading our conscience and closing our hearts to the Spirit of God. And if we do that – if we close our hearts to the Spirit of God within – we are not likely, I should think, to find our cure in some external source, whether it be the Bible or any other set of religious documents.

A Concluding Comment

It all boils down, I believe, to what kind of God we believe in. If we truly believe in the infinite love and wisdom of our Creator, even as our peasant woman above did, then we will be as invulnerable to the deceptions of the false prophets as she was. We will no longer fear, for example, that our Creator might permit an honest mistake in theology to jeopardize our future. We will simply proceed in the confidence that he knows us from the inside out far better than we know ourselves; that he will appreciate the ambiguities, the confusions, and the perplexities we face far better than we do; and that he will understand the historical and cultural factors that shape our beliefs far better than any historian does. Such a Creator – loving, intimate, and wise – would know how to work with us in infinitely complex ways, how to shatter our illusions and transform our thinking when necessary, and how best to reveal himself to us in the end.

Our responsibility is simply to make the best use of our faculties we can as we test every spirit and every self-proclaimed prophet who claims to speak in the name of God.