

## John Calvin: Theologian Of The Holy Spirit

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In an address on “John Calvin the theologian,” B. B. Warfield affirmed that Calvin’s interest “was most intense in the application to the sinful soul of the salvation wrought out by Christ ... Its effect ... has been to constitute Calvin pre-eminently *the theologian of the Holy Spirit*.” Warfield elaborates on the claim in this way:

In the same sense in which we may say that the doctrine of sin and grace dates from Augustine, the doctrine of satisfaction from Anselm, the doctrine of justification by faith from Luther—we must say that the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from Calvin to the church.

He proceeds to trace Calvin’s outworking of the Spirit’s work in the *Institutes*, from the inner witness of the Spirit, through regeneration in its widest sense of sinful man’s recovery by God, to the ongoing ministry of the Spirit in the believer. He concludes that “above everything else, 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.”<sup>1</sup>

### A God-Possessed Soul

Those convictions were expressed at the beginning of the twentieth century and many scholars have since that time sought to find a unifying principle in Calvin’s theology. For Wilhelm Niesel, writing in 1938, “Jesus Christ controls

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not only the content but also the form of Calvinistic thought.”<sup>2</sup> In mid-century several emphasized Calvin’s experience and piety as pivotal to an understanding of his teaching. For A. Mitchell Hunter, Calvin was “a God-possessed soul” whose religion was “reflected in his crest—a hand with a burning heart in it, and the words, ‘I give Thee all.’”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, John T. McNeill regarded Calvin’s conversion as “more significant than his literary equipment ... It is mainly through a knowledge of his personality and experience of God that we should seek whatever unity is to be discovered in his thinking. ‘God subdued my heart to teachableness.’”<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, J. I. Packer has drawn attention to the importance of correlating experience with theology in any assessment of Calvin by stating that “Calvinism must be understood as a way of thinking before it can be effectively estimated as a set of beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> Ganoczy suggested a triple orientation: “Glory to God alone, in Chris...

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