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CALVIN, PLANTINGA, AND THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: A RESPONSE TO BEVERSLUIS

Michael Czapkay Sudduth

In this paper I present a critical response to several claims made by John Beversluis on the closely allied topics of natural knowledge of God and the noetic effects of sin in relation to the work of John Calvin and Alvin Plantinga. I challenge Beversluis' claim that Plantinga has misconstrued Calvin's position on the *sensus divinitatis* and that he has weakened Calvin's doctrine of the noetic effects of sin. Moreover, I develop a coherent case for the sense in which Calvin maintains that fallen humans *do* and *do not* have a natural knowledge of God. My conclusion rebuts Beversluis' claim that Calvin denies any natural knowledge of God for fallen human persons and defends Plantinga's philosophical account of Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*.

In the 1930s Karl Barth and Emil Brunner debated whether and to what extent human persons have a natural knowledge of God, especially as this question arises in the context of John Calvin's discussion of the knowledge of God in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Barth is well known for his rejection of natural theology on the grounds that there is no knowledge of God, even as creator, apart from a knowledge of God as redeemer. Barth's slogan, *finitum non capax infiniti est*, expressed his fundamental conviction that God can only be known when He reveals Himself and the noetic effects of sin entail that grace is a necessary precondition for all knowledge of God.

In his challenging article "Reforming the 'Reformed' Objection to Natural Theology," (*Faith and Philosophy* 12, April 1995)¹ John Beversluis has resurrected the closely related topics of the natural knowledge of God and the noetic effects of sin in the context of contemporary philosophy of religion. His focus is the religious epistemology of Alvin Plantinga. Beversluis contends that Plantinga has misconstrued Calvin's doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) and as a result has substantially weakened Calvin's account of the noetic effects of sin. Beversluis maintains that Calvin, unlike Plantinga, is a fideist. Calvin, he claims, explicitly denies any natural knowledge of God for fallen human persons. It is my contention that it is Beversluis who has misconstrued Calvin's position on the natural knowledge of God, and as a result his critique of Plantinga is significantly defective.



I. *Plantinga, the Sensus Divinitatis, and the Noetic Effects of Sin*

Beverluis' first argument aims at showing that Plantinga has misunderstood Calvin's treatment of the *sensus divinitatis* in the opening chapters of the *Institutes*. Consequently, Plantinga's account of what fallen human persons are able to know by the deliverances of reason radically minimizes the noetic effects of sin and is incompatible with Calvin's account of natural knowledge of God. Beverluis begins by pointing out Plantinga's well-known interpretation of the opening chapters of Book I of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: Calvin believes that there is within the human mind an innate disposition to form belief in God in a broad range of widely realized experiential circumstances. Plantinga identifies this theistic belief-forming mechanism with what Calvin calls the *sensus divinitatis*, and it is triggered by the kinds of circumstances discussed by Calvin in chapter 5 of Book I of the *Institutes* (e.g., sight of the starry night sky).² In these circumstances people do often form beliefs like *God has created all this, God is present*, etc. Plantinga maintains that this tendency to form beliefs in God has been adversely affected by sin so that people do not always form theistic beliefs with the natural spontaneity they were designed to (and possibly fail to form belief in God at all in some instances).³ Nonetheless, there still exists an actual natural knowledge of God for many fallen human persons.

Beverluis claims that Plantinga has taken Calvin's discussion of the *sensus divinitatis* out of context. Whereas Plantinga understands Calvin's references to a functioning *sensus divinitatis* (in the *Institutes* 1:1-5) to refer to humans in their fallen state, Beverluis maintains that Calvin's discussion of the natural knowledge of God in these chapters is confined to a consideration of man's pre-fallen (or pre-lapsarian) state and so, being inapplicable to the epistemic capacities of fallen (or post-lapsarian) humans, is irrelevant to giving an account of the human epistemic situation with reference to belief in God. According to Beverluis, the fundamental thesis of the opening chapters of Book I of the *Institutes* is that "*fallen human beings lack both the direct and immediate knowledge of God with which they were created and the capacity to achieve it*" (RRO, p. 193). The *sensus divinitatis* is not merely "suppressed" by sin, but it is extinguished by sin (RRO, pp. 193-94). As a result, the *sensus divinitatis* "with which human beings were originally created is no longer operative in fallen humanity" (RRO, p. 193). Although there remains an objectively clear revelation of God (as Creator) in nature, it is subjectively obscured by sin. In fact, the revelation of God as Creator is not seen at all. Beverluis contrasts Plantinga's interpretation of Calvin with his own: Calvin "unambiguously asserts that, in their present fallen condition, human beings have no eyes to discern the revelation of God in Nature" (RRO, p. 194).

After quoting Calvin (*Institutes* 1.5.15) to the effect that post-lapsarian humans are by nature unable to attain "the pure and clear knowledge of God" he continues. . . .

Not only does Calvin not say what Plantinga claims he says; he explicitly denies it. According to Calvin, it is emphatically not the case that there is in fallen human beings "a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the

flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe" (R&BG, 80). . . .

Hence in spite of the universally present but epistemically inefficacious revelation of God in nature and in spite of the ineradicable but epistemically blinded *sensus divinitatis* in human nature, the pre-fallen "innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition" to believe in God with [which] human beings were originally created is now "suppressed" and "smothered" by ignorance and wickedness. (RRO, p. 195)

Beverluis then gives what he takes to be Calvin's account of how fallen human beings *can* and *do* attain knowledge of God. What is needed is the revelation of God in the Scriptures, as well as an internal work of grace in the heart. The natural revelation of God in creation cannot be perceived without faith. Without the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit fallen humans "are not capable - much less, innately disposed - to form the belief that God exists upon contemplating the beauty or the grandeur of Nature" (RRO, p. 196). In their fallen state humans "can believe in God only so far as the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit enables them to do so." (RRO, p. 197). The point is reiterated in his striking conclusion: "He [Calvin] is a fideist through and through - a theologian who believes that, so far as fallen human beings are concerned, knowledge of God is the result of the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit and hence a gift to God's elect" (RRO, p. 200).⁴

It seems then that Beverluis is setting up the following distinction between Plantinga and Calvin.

Plantinga maintains:

[P1] Human persons were originally created with a *sensus divinitatis* which is triggered in a broad range of widely realized experiential conditions which result in the formation of theistic beliefs Bt_1, \dots, Bt_n (where these theistic beliefs are of the form *God created all this, God is present*, etc.).

[P2] For human persons in their post-lapsarian state, the *sensus divinitatis*, though functional, is subject to a range of malfunctions so that it does not always yield theistic beliefs in accordance with the original human cognitive design plan.⁵

Although Beverluis agrees that Calvin holds [P1], he thinks that instead of [P2] Calvin maintains:

[C2] For human persons in their post-lapsarian state, the *sensus divinitatis* is completely nonfunctional so that it does not result in the formation of theistic beliefs Bt_1, \dots, Bt_n .

and

[C3] For human persons in their post-lapsarian state, theistic beliefs Bt_1, \dots, Bt_n are formed only by divine agency through regeneration.

It follows from [C2] and [C3] that:

[C4] For post-lapsarian human persons, there is no natural knowledge of God.

II. Two Kinds of Natural Knowledge of God

Do fallen human persons have a natural knowledge of God? The crux of the argument here is the meaning of the locution "knowledge of God."

In the first part of Beversluis' paper, in which he presents his first critique of Plantinga, he assumes - like Plantinga - a true belief plus "something else" account of knowledge. Here it is propositional knowledge about God that is at issue, and Beversluis' main claim is that the *sensus divinitatis* is epistemically inefficacious since it does not produce theistic beliefs of the sort that Plantinga claims. Plantinga's error is a defective view of the noetic effects of sin, thinking that humans could naturally form theistic beliefs that they cannot apart from grace. Unless a person is given the gift of faith by grace, there is no knowledge of God (i.e., true belief plus something else) based on the revelation of God in nature.

However, in the second part of his paper, Beversluis introduces a different sense to the locution "knowledge of God." He says that the kind of "knowledge" which Calvin thinks is essential to the Christian life is not merely theoretical in nature (a knowledge *that* or *about*, so-called propositional knowledge) but a knowledge which is experiential or affective and impacts human life and action.⁶

After quoting from Calvin's *Institutes* (1.2.1 and 1.5.9), Beversluis writes:

Calvin is not interested in the bare assertion that "God exists" or "there is such a person as God." His concern is not with certain alleged "deliverances of reason" in the form of "properly basic" beliefs. For him, knowledge of God is not theoretical knowledge *about* God but a personal relationship *to* God which manifests itself in a life of obedience and which leads to piety and morally upright conduct which he regards as the fruit of true religion. Knowing God involves loving God. (RRO, pp. 198-199)

According to Beversluis grace is a necessary precondition for this particular kind of "knowledge of God", call it the "experiential" knowledge of God, which includes a love of and obedience to God. This kind of knowledge is not the same as the theoretical or propositional knowledge Beversluis discusses in the first part of his paper, and so the sense in which fallen humans cannot have a natural knowledge of God changes in the course of the paper. Although there is no logical inconsistency in denying a post-lapsarian natural knowledge of God in Beversluis' two senses, I do not think that Beversluis has properly handled the distinction he draws. Moreover, I think that the failure to handle this distinction properly leads Beversluis into a rather significant contradiction in his paper.

After explaining the distinction between a mere theoretical knowledge

of God and the affecting knowledge of God, Beversluis admits that fallen humans “*already* believe in God” (RRO, p. 199). He adds: “there are no atheists.” Here Beversluis reconstructs what he takes to be Calvin’s “Reformed” objection to natural theology: since everyone already believes in God, there is no point to constructing theistic arguments. And natural theology is concerned with theoretical not experiential knowledge of God. Beversluis takes these two points to be the essence of the original Reformed objection to natural theology, not a commitment to properly basic theistic beliefs as Plantinga holds.

I find Beversluis’ statements in the second part of his paper most perplexing given all he argued in the first part of his article. The great dichotomy in his first argument was between a theoretical knowledge about God construed as a deliverance of reason (Plantinga’s Calvin) and the view that all such theoretical knowledge is achievable only by divine grace (Beversluis’ Calvin).⁷ Much was made of the point that without grace fallen persons do not even have the capacity “to form the belief that God exists” when they look at the beauty and grandeur of nature. What could Beversluis possibly mean, then, when he asserts both (i) everyone already believes in God and (ii) no one can believe in God apart from a work of grace? If we assume (as Beversluis appears to) that grace is not given to everyone, then (ii) entails that some people do not believe in God. But this contradicts his later statements according to which people *do* hold certain propositions about the existence of God. Perhaps part of the problem here is that Beversluis does not unpack his crucial concession that people do believe in God. He does not explain the content of such beliefs. Are all such beliefs of fallen humans false beliefs, so that they do not constitute (theoretical) knowledge? This seems implausible. Or are they true but lacking some other property necessary for knowledge? He develops no epistemological apparatus to clarify his claims. He is simply vague about how this “belief in God” present in every fallen person differs from the “belief in God” Plantinga is concerned with elucidating and which Beversluis asserts cannot be arrived at without grace.

III. Calvin on Post-Lapsarian Natural Knowledge of God

In response to Beversluis I would claim that Calvin does teach that fallen, and yes unregenerate, people do hold (some) true beliefs about God, where such beliefs are among the deliverances of reason.⁸ In this sense, then, fallen humans can and do have a natural knowledge of God apart from an internal work of the Spirit. Beversluis mentions Calvin’s awareness of Paul’s statement in Romans: “the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Romans 1:20). But the suppressing of the truth in unrighteousness that Paul goes on to develop certainly seems to presuppose that what God has revealed “is understood.”

Calvin comments:

He [Paul] does not mention all the particulars which may be thought to belong to God; but he states, that we can arrive at the knowledge

of his eternal power and divinity; for he who is the framer of all things, must necessarily be without beginning and from himself. When we arrive at this point, the divinity becomes known to us, which cannot exist except accompanied with all the attributes of a God, since they are all included under that idea. . . . Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness it is not found to be sufficient. . . . We conceive that there is a Deity; and then we conclude that he ought to be worshiped: but our reason here fails, because it cannot ascertain who or what sort of being God is.^{9,10}

In his *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, Calvin relates the account of Paul and Barnabas who offered arguments for the providential care of God since “they take this principle, that in the order of nature there is a certain and evident manifestation of God.”¹¹ Calvin does not disapprove. Presumably Beversluis would, for if this order in nature is seen only by faith, the Apostle was acting foolishly. Moreover, it is this “evident manifestation” which forms the basis of Paul’s apologetic at Mars Hill. According to Calvin, Paul “showeth by natural arguments who and what God is,”¹² and since “he hath to deal with profane men, he draweth proofs from nature itself; for in vain should he have cited testimonies of Scripture.”¹³ Now although Calvin is careful to note in this context that there is a “true knowledge of God” which is a gift and comes by faith, this is carefully distinguished from a “general knowledge of God”¹⁴ which remains in fallen humans. Calvin says that by nature fallen humans are imbued with some sense of God: “*aliquo Dei sensu imbuti sunt*”. Although unregenerate people entertain wrong ideas about God, or in some cases even deny his existence, Calvin insists that there is a natural knowledge of God in fallen humans. In his commentaries on both Romans and Acts Calvin says that the natural knowledge is “insufficient.” But Calvin is clear about the nature of this “insufficiency.” For one, it is only a knowledge of God as Creator, not as Redeemer. Secondly, since without grace fallen humans have confused ideas of God, Scripture helps us to understand properly who and what God is, thereby disabusing us of false notions about the Creator. Most importantly, man’s natural knowledge is not salvific - does not include a love of and obedience to God. What Calvin calls a “true”, “clear”, or “pure” knowledge of God is both affective and effective. Man’s natural knowledge of God is not.¹⁵

Calvin’s position in the commentaries is consistent with what he says in the *Institutes*. In the *Institutes* Calvin distinguishes between a “pure and clear knowledge” of God (which has reference to both a right conception of what God is and affective knowledge) and “perceptions” or “convictions” that “there is some God” (1.3.3) or “some conception of God” (1.3.2) and that “he is their Maker” (1.3.1).¹⁶ When Calvin refers to the “primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright” (1.2.1), he is referring to knowledge in the former sense. This knowledge certainly *includes* a propositional component. Calvin says that even the few who deny that God exists, “from time

to time feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe" (1.3.2). Calvin seems to think of knowledge of God's existence in this sense as something like a "bare" knowledge of God, which carries with it some notion of God's nature. This is clearly propositional knowledge, as opposed to the more affective or experiential knowledge that is Calvin's main interest. The failure of this "bare" knowledge is partly epistemic: people sometimes have false beliefs about God (though Calvin is careful *not* to assert that no one has any true beliefs about God). More importantly, the bare knowledge does not affect fallen humans as it ought. We are not moved to love and worship God. Beversluis has correctly located this failure of natural knowledge. But Calvin most certainly does not deny that the *sensus divinitatis* is functional in fallen humans so that it produces no true theistic beliefs.¹⁷ There still remains what I am calling a propositional knowledge. This knowledge at least includes propositions of the form "there is some God," "God is one," "God is powerful," and "God is Creator of the world." In this sense, according to Calvin, fallen humans can and do have a natural knowledge of God.

IV. Theistic Knowledge and Accountability to God

Beversluis rightly points out that for Calvin natural revelation has a post-lapsarian function: leaving humans "without excuse" for their sins before God (RRO, p. 195). The original edition of the *Institutes*, being modeled on Luther's *Catechism*, introduced the topic of "knowledge of God" in the context of an exposition of the law of God, thereby placing Calvin's epistemological discussion in a distinct moral and religious context. But what exactly is the connection between the implicit epistemological claims and the explicit issue of moral and/or religious accountability before God? It has been argued that fallen humans are responsible before God because there *is* an objectively clear revelation of God in the created order, but men fail to see this revelation of God as creator because, as fallen, they are noetically blind. Moreover, though our noetic blindness is a consequence of our fallen nature, we are nonetheless responsible for our fallen nature and so responsible before God. This model would seem to provide Beversluis with a way of maintaining the post-lapsarian relevance of natural *revelation* without affirming any post-lapsarian natural *knowledge*.¹⁸

Beversluis might find some support for this claim as others have in the *Institutes* (1.5.14-15). In these chapters Calvin seems to base human accountability on the fact that God's revelation in creation is objectively clear and humans are blind to it because they have willingly chosen to smother the natural light God has given them. The manifestation of God in creation renders men inexcusable (1.5.14) and we are prevented from acquiring by natural ability a pure and clear knowledge of God, but "all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us" (1.5.15). Yet though elsewhere Calvin grounds the noetic effects of sin in the transmission of a sinful nature inherited from Adam (so that we are all born with noetic defects of some sort), Calvin here emphasizes noetic corruption as caused by acts of personal sin. Notice, though, that the natural revelation in creation strikes "some sparks" but "their fuller light" is what is smothered.

ered by perverted human will. Consequently, we are not led on "the right path." Calvin is concerned with the willful corruption of the "seed of the knowledge of God" so that it fails to bear "proper fruit." The discussion of the (inherited and acquired) noetic effects of sin in the *Institutes* is compatible with some bare knowledge of God.

This conclusion is further substantiated by Calvin's exposition of Romans 1:18-23, which inspired and forms the background to the discussion in the *Institutes*. In his 1540 *Commentary on Romans* Calvin explicitly asserts that it is a *knowledge* of God possessed by fallen human persons which renders them inexcusable.¹⁹ After affirming the majesty of God set forth in the created order, Calvin makes three claims: (i) the evidence of God's existence in creation is sufficiently clear in itself, (ii) it is rendered obscure [not eradicated] by human blindness, and (iii) human blindness does not preclude our having some knowledge of God in our fallen state. Calvin writes: "We are not so blind that we can plead our ignorance as an excuse for our perverseness. We conceive that there is a Deity; and then we conclude, that whoever he may be, he ought to be worshipped. . . .but this knowledge which avails only to take away excuse, differs greatly from that which brings salvation. . . ." ²⁰ Calvin's interest here is to affirm some post-lapsarian knowledge of God as a basis for accountability to God, while at the same time denying the completeness or purity of this knowledge, for he says that it is only by the light of Scripture and faith that we can obtain the knowledge of "who or what sort of being God is."

Calvin apparently has a complex theory of moral and religious accountability. There are both positive and negative grounds of inexcusability. We are born with original sin derived from Adam, and this entails inherited noetic effects of sin. In this context we are without excuse when we fail to worship God because, despite the inherited noetic effects of sin, we know at least this much: there is a Creator God and He ought to be worshipped.²¹ But there are also acquired noetic effects of sin, and as a consequence we are also without excuse if we lack a clear knowledge of God, because we willingly corrupt our natural knowledge of God.

Having said this I hasten to add that the presence of some natural knowledge of God in fallen, unregenerate people is compatible with their not acknowledging the existence of God or their claiming not to believe or know that God exists. Self-deception may be regarded as another noetic effect of sin. Calvin certainly holds that humans rebel against the light God has offered them in nature. But this rebellion, suppression of truth in unrighteousness, and corruption of the clear knowledge of God are all compatible with a set of true beliefs and stock of natural knowledge of God.²² Persons may know that God exists, even if they choose to live their life without reference to him. Beversluis comes close to seeing this point when he says that all people believe in God but not all acknowledge their beliefs. What Beversluis should have argued is that, though there are natural theistic beliefs produced by a functioning *sensus divinitatis*, we must recognize that this faculty (or related ones) is subject to various malfunctions that entail the production of a mixture of true and false theistic beliefs, as well as a refusal to acknowledge one's theistic beliefs.²³ But this way of looking at matters is entirely compatible with what Plantinga says

about the *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga's examples of properly basic theistic beliefs are a legitimate elaboration of the propositional content Calvin thinks is epistemically accessible for fallen humans by natural reason alone, even though such knowledge is not what Calvin thinks of as a "true" or "pure" knowledge of God.

V. Conclusion

Plantinga's epistemological account of the *sensus divinitatis* is a rigorous epistemological unpacking of Calvin's empirical claim that people do believe in God and that this belief is universally distributed. Beversluis fails to see that this point is similar to what he himself concedes in the second part of the article, thereby rendering his critical account of Plantinga in the first part of the article fundamentally wrong-headed. Although Calvin may not have been interested in epistemological questions, epistemological commitments are implicit in the text. Moreover, Beversluis' identification of normativity with "justification" (being within one's intellectual rights) overlooks a second kind of normativity which is the focus of Plantinga's more recent work: the normativity of proper function (how something *should* function when it is functioning in accordance with a design plan of some sort). Perhaps Calvin was not concerned with matters of rationality construed as "intellectual rights." Perhaps such a thing never entered his head. But Calvin is certainly committed to the view that we are created in the image of God and thus created with a theistic purpose. This creative act and theistic purpose is revealed everywhere in our life. Plantinga's position is that it is revealed in our cognitive life as well. Maybe this is not the most important consequence of being created in the image of God, but it is hardly irrelevant. When human beings are functioning properly (as God designed them) they do in fact form various theistic beliefs. We can call this a rationality of proper function. Because of sin, the *sensus divinitatis* is subject to various malfunctions. People do not always form theistic belief(s), sometimes they do not form theistic belief(s) with the degree of firmness which is specified by God's design plan, and - as Calvin points out - humans sometimes form false beliefs about God. All of this seems to me to be a legitimate development and explanation of Calvin's implicit epistemology based on a rigorous theistic metaphysics.²⁴

Beversluis has in typical Barthian fashion confused two distinct issues: the *epistemic* efficacy and the *behavioral* efficacy of knowledge of God. Better yet, he has confused the proper and pure knowledge of God (with its affective and moral element) with what lies within the grasp of fallen natural reason at the theoretical level. As far as I can see, Plantinga nowhere says that the kind of knowledge he is concerned with elucidating vis-a-vis the *sensus divinitatis* has the behavioral efficacy which Beversluis thinks Calvin associates with the knowledge of God. So even if this is Calvin's objection to natural theology, it is not clear that Plantinga has underestimated the noetic effects of sin. Plantinga may have a different interest from Calvin, but there is no significant discontinuity between them regarding the extent of the noetic effects of sin. If we understand by "knowledge" a purely "epistemic" category, loosely corresponding to true belief plus "something

else" (justification, warrant, etc), I do not see that Plantinga is defective at all. He has not to any significant degree minimized the noetic effects of sin.

Beverluis' two arguments involve a crucial switch in the *meaning* of the locution "knowledge of God". The result is a logical disconnectedness between his arguments, and a loss of internal coherence within the paper as a whole. When he denies that Calvin holds that there is a natural knowledge of God for fallen humans, either he is using that locution as he does on pages 198-9 (to refer to affective knowledge) or he is using it as Plantinga does. If he means the former, then his comments are inapplicable to Plantinga's position, as the two are talking about two different things. If, on the other hand, Beverluis uses knowledge as Plantinga is using the term, then what Beverluis says is not consistent with either Calvin or, as I see it, Beverluis' own claims in the second part of his article. So perhaps there are two Reformed objections to natural theology (I suspect there are more than that). One thing is clear, the Barthian assessment of Calvin still falters in that it fails to distinguish the different ways Calvin himself uses the word "knowledge," and hence fails to capture the ways in which fallen humans do and do not have a natural knowledge of God.²⁵

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NOTES

1. All references to this article will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation, RRO.

2. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1983), pp. 65-67.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, 1991, pp. 303-310. See also his forthcoming *Warranted Christian Belief*, chapter 8.

4. It is not clear whether Beverluis intends "knowledge of God" here to mean "existential" knowledge (in which case he is quite correct) or "theoretical" knowledge of God as Redeemer (in which case he is also correct) or "theoretical" knowledge of God as Creator (in which case he is **not** correct).

5. To be more technical, what we have according to Plantinga is a *design plan* for our cognitive life that stipulates the sorts of beliefs we should form in certain circumstances (the force of "should" here corresponds to the normativity of proper function). This extends to theistic belief(s) as well. Following Plantinga, let us assume that the cognitive module responsible for basic theistic belief is the *sensus divinitatis*. The design plan will include a broad range of circumstance-belief pairs such as <sight of the starry night sky, firm belief that God created all this>. When the *sensus divinitatis* is functioning properly, this is how things will go. Conversely, when it is not functioning properly, the widely realized experiential circumstance(s) will not be accompanied by a corresponding firm theistic belief. We will get things like <sight of the starry night sky, less than firm belief that God created all this> or <sight of the starry night sky, [no theistic belief]>. These will be some of the ways of spelling out the noetic effects of sin given Plantinga's theory of warrant and proper function. For a more thorough account of this, and its consequences for natural theology, see my hopefully forthcoming "Proper Function and the Epistemic Consequences

of the Noetic Effects of Sin.”

6. Calvin’s distinctive use of “knowledge” is developed by Edward Dowey (who calls it an existential knowledge), Gerald Postema (who contrasts knowledge as commitment and knowledge as merely propositional), William Bouwsma (who distinguishes between affective and frigid knowledge), and Dewey Hoitenga (who distinguishes between a propositional and moral component to knowledge of God). See Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, 3rd Edition (Eerdmans’s Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1994; reprint, 1952), pp. 24-31; Postema, “Calvin’s Alleged Rejection of Natural Theology,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7, ed. Richard C. Gamble (Garland Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1992), pp. 140-141; Bouwsma, “Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Learning,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7, p. 241; and Hoitenga, “Faith and Reason in Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7, p. 309.

7. That this is actually what Beversluis means to assert in the first part of the article is clear from his endnote no. 21 in which he denies (*contra* Dewey Hoitenga’s claim) that the “true knowledge of God” Calvin puts beyond the grasp of fallen, unregenerate, humans is confined to a “knowledge of piety” or affective knowledge. According to Beversluis, by “true knowledge of God” Calvin has in mind “both theoretical knowledge and knowledge of piety” (RRO, p. 203).

8. I have argued elsewhere that such beliefs are not restricted to basic beliefs but include many instances of inferential or non-basic beliefs. See my “The Prospects for ‘Mediate’ Natural Theology in John Calvin,” in *Religious Studies* 31, March 1995.

9. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans in Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. John Owen, vol. 19 of 22 vols., ed. Henry Beveridge (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1979; reprint), Romans 1:20 (p. 70).

10. In “Calvin on Romans 1:20 and the Possibility of Natural Theology” (unpublished) Arvin Vos gives an excellent account of Calvin’s interpretation of this text of Scripture. Among Vos’s observations is that for Calvin man is capable of discerning enough about God in creation to be without excuse, but sin keeps him from a “true knowledge of God.” But this does not imply that fallen humans have no knowledge of God whatsoever.

11. Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles in Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. Christopher Fetherstone, vol. 19 of 22 vols., Acts 14:17 (p. 19).

12. *Ibid.*, Acts 17:22 (p. 154).

13. *Ibid.*, Acts 17:24 (p. 158).

14. *Ibid.*, Acts 17:27 (pp. 167-170).

15. These distinctions convince me that Calvin does not contradict himself either in the commentaries or in the *Institutes*. Calvin simply uses the word “knowledge” in several different ways. The failure to grasp his different uses has led some to overestimate the extent of man’s natural abilities, others to underestimate such abilities, and still others to conclude that Calvin’s account is simply self-contradictory.

16. All quotations from the *Institutes* are taken from the *Library of Christian Classics* edition, translated by Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

17. This is readily recognized by many of the leading commentators on Calvin. B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1956), pp. 33-48; Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1994; reprint, 1954), chapter 3; Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European*

Reformation (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 1987), pp. 56-57; Dewey Hoytenga, *From Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (State University of New York Press: New York, 1991), pp.153-157, 164. See also articles by Postema, Bouwsma, and John Newton Smith in *Calvin and Calvinism*. Smith, for instance, writes: "it is important to underscore his [Calvin's] positive teaching about the sense of divinity: man, despite his aberrations, actually possesses a knowledge of the one God. This is not a knowledge which once was, or that might be, or that exists only 'in principle' but a genuine awareness of Deity. Further, it is possessed not [only] by Adam in the Garden of Eden, but by fallen, sinful, historic children of Adam" ("Natural Theology in the Thought of John Calvin" in *Calvin and Calvinism*, p. 152). Only Barthians seem to be bewildered by this standard interpretation of Calvin.

18. This is the traditional Barthian interpretation which stresses the subjective impossibility of a natural knowledge of God in the fallen state (though allowing its objective possibility "if Adam had not sinned" (*Institutes* 1.2.1)) and locates human inexcusability solely in the fact that there is a revelation of God in nature. See Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), pp. 106-9.

19. For historical background to Calvin's treatment of this passage and a fairly accurate exposition of Calvin's interpretation, see David Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God," in *Via Augustini: Augustine in the Later Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. H.A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), pp. 142-56, reprinted in Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 23-39.

20. *Commentary on Romans* in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Romans 1:21 (p. 71).

21. Accounts of Calvin on human blindness often fail to note that in the *Commentary on Romans* Calvin qualifies the extent of human blindness by important phrases like *caeterum non ita caeci sumus* ("we are not so blind. . .") and *videmus eatenus nequid iam possimus tergiversari* ("we see enough to keep us from making an excuse"). By the time of the later editions of the *Institutes*, Calvin adopted more modest metaphors to express the noetic effects of sin, such as "weak vision" (*Institutes* 1.6.1).

22. Depending on the conditions for "knowledge" it may be that some people do not know that there is a God even if they hold the belief that God exists. For instance, if knowledge of God depends upon a properly functioning cognitive system, the noetic effects of sin may result in cognitive malfunctions that defeat the positive epistemic status of theistic belief. Also a person's acquiring overriding reasons for supposing that theistic belief is false or based on inadequate grounds may defeat the positive epistemic status of theistic beliefs. For a detailed account of defeaters in this regard, see my "Can Religious Unbelief be Proper Function Rational?" (forthcoming *Faith and Philosophy*).

23. Perhaps there is a distinction here between belief (i.e., a disposition to feel it true that p upon considering p) and acceptance (i.e., choosing p as a policy for decision making) which can express the diversified noetic effects of sin. In that case, Beversluis may be correct when he says that there are no atheists (in the sense of people who hold no theistic beliefs), only people who think and so assert that they are atheists (who take this as a policy for action in their lives). See David Reiter's "Calvin's 'Sense of Divinity' and Externalist Knowledge of God" (forthcoming *Faith and Philosophy*) in which this distinction is developed.

24. In *Warranted Christian Belief* (forthcoming) Plantinga further develops Reformed epistemology by explaining the "epistemic" role of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

25. I would like to thank Kelly Clark and William Wainwright for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.