

Calvin's Institutes, Book Three, *The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ* [cont'd]

CHAPTER II FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED

Calvin has spent the previous chapter, the first chapter in Book Three, describing the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as he creates faith in us. Now, in Chapter II, Calvin will thoroughly describe the attributes of that faith which is created in us by the Holy Spirit.

Calvin provides a long list of topics in this chapter, which I've listed below. We will look at those parts of each topic which are most relevant for our class. I expect this to take at least 6 sessions:

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
The Object of Faith is Christ	1	Dec 2, 2007
Faith and Knowledge	2-5	"
Faith and the Word of God	6-7	"
Unacceptable Definitions of Faith	8-13	Dec 9, 2007
A Detailed Definition of Faith	14-15	"
Faith and Fear	16-28	Feb 3, 2008
The Basis of Faith	29-32	TBD
Faith Revealed in Our Hearts by the Spirit	33-37	"
Refutation of Scholastic Objections	38-40	"
Relation of Faith to Hope and Love	41-43	"

The Autumn semester of the School of Discipleship will soon end. The last class is planned for Sunday, Dec. 9. We will resume in the Spring semester wherever we have left off this Autumn.

Topic: *The Object of Faith is Christ* (sec 1, only)

Section 1Outline

- 1) Calvin reviews the logic that underlies the Gospel:
 - a. "First, God lays down for us through the law what we should do; if we then fail in any part of it, that dreadful sentence of eternal death which it pronounces will rest upon us."
 - b. "Secondly, it is not only hard, but above our strength and beyond all our abilities, to fulfill the law to the letter; thus, if we look to ourselves only, and ponder what condition we deserve, no trace of good hope will remain; but cast away by God, we shall lie under eternal death."
 - c. "Thirdly, it has been explained that there is but one means of liberation that can rescue us from such miserable calamity: the appearance of Christ the Redeemer, through whose hand the Heavenly Father, pitying us out of his infinite goodness

- and mercy, willed to help us, if, indeed, with firm faith we embrace this mercy and rest in it with steadfast hope."
- 2) Calvin, now having motivated an interest in the fundamental importance of faith, declares that we need to carefully examine what this faith ought to be like, because there are many erroneous opinions concerning it. (Each of the negations below will be discussed later by Calvin.)
 - a. Faith is not a mere opinion or persuasion (strong opinion).
 - b. It is not just assent to the gospel history (assenting to Christ's coming and work).
 - c. It is not a speculative or philosophic faith in "God."
 - 3) Positively, the first question is to ask what the "object" of faith should be. Calvin labors to show that the object of faith is Jesus Christ. Reasons are:
 - a. God dwells in inaccessible light, therefore Christ must become our intermediary as the object of faith.
 - b. Christ is the light of the world.
 - c. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.
 - d. Only Christ can make the Father known to us.
 - e. Faith is described in the New Testament as "faith in Christ."
 - f. The glory of God shines in the face of Christ.
 - g. God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ's splendor had not beamed upon us.
 - h. Christ communicates his glory and benefits to us.
 - i. The image of the invisible Father is only to be sought in Christ.
 - j. Calvin quotes Augustine, saying that Christ as God is the destination, and Christ as man is the path to that destination.
 - k. All the stability of faith rests in Christ.
 - l. It is "through Christ" that we believe in God. Evidently Calvin is interpreting the phrase "through Christ" to mean "through believing in Christ."

Calvin text with notes:

The contrast of Law and Gospel.

True faith in Christ is the key to eternal life.

Therefore, vague ideas about faith are dangerous.

Ways things go wrong.

Faith must be focused on Christ.

Scripture proofs for focusing faith on Christ.

But, it will be easy to understand all these matters after a clearer definition of faith has been presented, to enable our readers to grasp its force and nature. We may well recall here what was explained before: **First**, God lays down for us through the law what we should do; if we then fail in any part of it, that dreadful sentence of eternal death which it pronounces will rest upon us.¹ **Secondly**, it is not only hard, but above our strength and beyond all our abilities, to fulfill the law to the letter; thus, if we look to ourselves only, and ponder what condition we deserve, no trace of good hope will remain; but cast away by God, we shall lie under eternal death.² **Thirdly**, it has been explained that there is but one means of liberation that can rescue us from such miserable calamity: the appearance of Christ the Redeemer, through whose hand the Heavenly Father, pitying us out of his infinite goodness and mercy, willed to help us;³ if, indeed, with firm faith we embrace this mercy and rest in it with steadfast hope.⁴

But now we ought to examine what this faith ought to be like, through which those adopted by God as his children come to possess the Heavenly Kingdom, since it is certain that no mere opinion or even persuasion is capable of bringing so great a thing to pass. And we must scrutinize and investigate the true character of faith with greater care and zeal because many are dangerously deluded today in this respect. Indeed, most people, when they hear this term, understand nothing deeper than a common assent to the gospel history.⁵ In fact, when faith is discussed in the schools,⁶ they call God simply the object of faith, and by fleeting speculations, as we have elsewhere stated,⁷ lead miserable souls astray rather than direct them to a definite goal.⁸ For since “God dwells in inaccessible light” [1 Tim 6:16], Christ must become our intermediary. Hence, he calls himself “the light of the world” [John 8:12], and elsewhere, “the way, the truth, and the life”; for no one comes to the Father, who is “the fountain of life” [Ps 36:9], except through him [John 14:6] because he alone knows the Father, and afterward the believers to whom he wishes to reveal him [Luke 10:22]. On this ground, Paul declares that he considers nothing worth knowing save Christ [1 Cor 2:2]. In the twentieth chapter of Acts he relates that he has preached “faith in ... Christ” [vs 21]. And in another passage he has Christ speak as follows: “I shall send you among the Gentiles ..., that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a

¹ The instruction of the Law, properly received, conveys the knowledge of righteousness, and, by contrast with our own behavior, also thereby conveys the knowledge of sin.

² The Law includes a curse for disobedience, which, in the absence of an atonement, results in eternal death.

³ The atonement of Christ is the only sufficient remedy.

⁴ This remedy is received by a faith which perseveres through the tests of faith.

⁵ This is what is meant nowadays by the technical term “historical faith.” This is not the same as “living,” or “saving” faith, though the latter obviously does include historical knowledge. See James 2.

⁶ By the term “schools,” Calvin is thinking of the medieval tradition of the Scholastic Theology, which was dominated too much by Aristotle’s Philosophy.

⁷ This found in Institutes (Book. Chapt. Section): I. ii. 2; I. x. 1; II. vi. 4. Since we did not cover this in class, if you are interested you can look it up in a copy of the Institutes.

⁸ Calvin says: To direct people to an abstract philosophical conception of “God” as their “object of faith” is not only “impractical for common folks,” but is wrong for everyone, even the “learned.” Rather, the “object of faith” is a certain divine Person, the Incarnate Son of God, whose purpose in coming among us is to reveal the saving glory of God in himself, and also to be seen as that one in whom we may see the face of the Father.

place among the saints through faith that is in me" [Acts 26:17-18]. And Paul testifies that the glory of God is visible to us in His person, or -- what amounts to the same thing -- that the enlightening knowledge of the glory of God shines in His face [2 Cor 4:6].

Monotheism not effective, unless it looks to God in Christ.

Christ is the mediator of the revelation of God.

God can be known no other way.

We only believe in God through Christ.

Indeed, it is true that faith looks to one God. But this must also be added, "To know Jesus Christ whom he has sent" [John 17:3]. For God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ's splendor had not beamed upon us. For this purpose the Father laid up with his only-begotten Son all that he had[, in order to] to reveal himself in Christ[,], so that Christ, by communicating his Father's benefits, might express the true image of his glory [Heb 1:3]. It has been said that we must be drawn by the Spirit to be aroused to seek Christ; so, in turn, we must be warned that the invisible Father is to be sought solely in this image. Augustine has finely spoken of this matter: in discussing the goal of faith, he teaches that we must know our destination and the way to it. Then, immediately after, he infers that the way that is most fortified against all errors is he who was both God and man; namely, as God he is the destination to which we move; as man, the path by which we go. Both are found in Christ alone. But, while Paul proclaims faith in God, he does not have in mind to overturn what he so often emphasizes concerning faith: namely, that all its stability rests in Christ. Peter, indeed, most effectively connects both, saying that through him we believe in God [1 Peter 1:21].

Topic: *Faith involves knowledge; the true doctrine obscured by the Scholastic notion of implicit faith* (sec 2-5)

Section 2: Faith rests upon knowledge, not upon pious ignorance, and

Section 3: The Scholastic doctrine of "implicit" faith is basically false

Outline

Calvin refutes a medieval error, namely, that submitting ones mind and conscience to the teaching of the church, without having to know or understand the teaching of the gospel, is all that is necessary to receive entry to the Kingdom of God. This is the doctrine of "implicit faith." Calvin objects to this by emphasizing:

- 1) Faith rests upon knowledge,⁹ not pious ignorance (the medieval "implicit faith").
- 2) Submitting ones feeling obediently to the church, without otherwise understanding the details of the Gospel, is not enough for entrance into the Kingdom of God.
- 3) We must know what the gospel of Christ actually is, and actually believe it. (The following quotes are from Section 2).
 - a. "We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing."

⁹ Calvin must not be construed as saying that Christianity is a form of intellectualism, or rationalism (the "isms" involve ultimate dependence on reason). But faith is directed toward certain propositions in the mind, which are embraced as true also by the heart. (The head/heart distinction is frequently used by Calvin, so I do, too!)

- b. "But we do so when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ [2 Cor 5:18-19], and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life."
- c. "By this knowledge, I say, not by submission of our feeling, do we obtain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven."
- d. "For when the apostle says, 'With the heart a man believes unto righteousness, with the mouth makes confession unto salvation' [Rom 10:10], he indicates that it is not enough for a man implicitly to believe what he does not understand or even investigate. But he requires explicit recognition of the divine goodness upon which our righteousness rests."

This divine goodness, in the context of the progress of argument through the Institutes, is clearly a reference to the work of Christ, which was just discussed at the end of Book Two.

- 4) "For faith consists in the knowledge of God and Christ [John 17:3], not in reverence for the church." (Section 3)

Section 4. Even right faith is always surrounded by error and unbelief

Calvin, having criticized the "implicit faith" of the medieval Roman church because of its virtual replacement of faith in Christ with faith in the church, now must deal with the real underlying issue -- the weakness of faith in all men in general. In the process of doing this, Calvin will develop and explain his own doctrine of "implicit faith."

Calvin uses the term "implicit faith" to mean sometimes ignorance, sometimes weakness of faith. Our lack of spiritual knowledge, and the dregs of unbelief that remain attached to us, serve to give our (true) faith an element of "implicitness." We do believe and want to believe what the Word says, and what the teachers of the Word say (yes, even what the church says), and we also receive the "big picture" of the Gospel, and receive the person of Christ, without understanding all the details. But, in all this, our attention is focused on Christ as the end of our knowledge. We are not simply resting ignorantly, while saying that "we believe what the church teaches, whatever it is," without knowing what it is, or even without being reminded of the gospel by the church.

Calvin: We certainly admit that so long as we dwell as strangers in the world there is such a thing as implicit faith;¹⁰ not only because many things are as yet hidden from us, but because surrounded by many clouds of errors we do not comprehend everything. The height of wisdom for the most perfect is to go forward and, quietly and humbly, to strive still further. Therefore Paul exhorts believers that, if some disagree with others in any matter, they should wait for revelation [Phil 3:15]. Experience obviously teaches that until we put off the flesh we attain less than we should like. And in our daily reading of Scripture we come upon many obscure passages that convict us of ignorance. With this bridle God keeps us within bounds, assigning to each his "measure of faith" [Rom 12:3] so that even the best teacher may be ready to learn.

¹⁰ "Implicit faith" in this context seems to mean a faith which is not too precise, and filled with unanswered questions. It's an intention without full knowledge.

Remarkable examples of this implicit faith may be noted in Christ's disciples before they attained full enlightenment. We see how with difficulty they taste even the first rudiments, halting over the slightest matters, and though hanging on their Master's words, making but little progress. Indeed, when, warned by the women, they rush to the tomb, the resurrection of their Master seems to them like a dream [Luke 24:11-12; John 20:8]. Since Christ previously bore witness to their faith, it is wrong to say that they were completely devoid of it. No, unless they had been persuaded that Christ would rise again, all zeal would have failed them. Nor was it superstition that prompted the women to anoint with spices the corpse of a dead man for whose life there could be no hope. But although they had faith in the words of him whom they knew to be truthful, the ignorance that as yet occupied their minds so enveloped their faith in darkness that they were almost dumbfounded. Hence, also, it is said that they finally believed after they themselves had discovered the truth of Christ's words through the very fact of his resurrection. Not that they then began to believe, but because the seed of hidden faith -- which had been dead, as it were, in their hearts -- at that time burst through with renewed vigor! For there was in them a true but implicit faith because they had reverently embraced Christ as their sole teacher. Then, taught by him, they were convinced he was the author of their salvation. And finally, they believed he came from heaven that, through the Father's grace, he might gather his disciples thither. We ought not to seek any more intimate proof of this than that unbelief is, in all men, always mixed with faith.¹¹

Section 5. "Implicit" faith as prerequisite of faith

Calvin also is willing to use the term "implicit faith" for that stage of belief which he thinks can occur psychologically before real faith sets in. He is required to do this because the Scripture often uses the word "faith" with a reduced significance and meaning than when faith is considered to be "saving."

Calvin: We may also call that faith implicit which is still strictly nothing but the preparation of faith. The Evangelists relate that very many believed who, caught up into wonderment by the miracles only,¹² did not advance farther than to believe Christ the Messiah who had been promised, although they had not been imbued with even a trace of the gospel teaching. Such reverent attention, which disposed them to submit themselves willingly to Christ, is graced with the title "faith"; yet it was only the beginning of faith. Thus, the court official who believed Christ's promise concerning the healing of his son [John 4:50], having returned to his house, as the Evangelist testifies, believed anew [John 4:53] because he first received as an oracle what he had heard from the mouth of Christ, and then submitted to Christ's authority to receive the teaching. Yet we must know that he was so teachable and ready to learn that in the first passage his admission of belief signifies a particular faith,¹³ while in the second passage he is counted among the disciples who had enlisted with Christ.¹⁴ John sets forth a like example in the Samaritans who so believed the word of a woman that they eagerly rushed to Christ, but spoke to her, when they heard him, as follows: "Now we do not believe on account of your speaking, but we have heard him and we know that it is the Savior of the world" [John 4:42]. From these instances it is clear that even those who are not yet imbued with the first elements but are still inclined to hearken are called "believers"; not in an exact sense, indeed, but in so far as God in his kindness deigns to grace that pious affection with such great honor.

¹¹ So, in this numbered section, Calvin shows a way to use the term "implicit faith" to refer to weak, and nearly vanishing, but real faith.

¹² Sometimes, technically, this is nowadays called the "faith of miracles."

¹³ Calvin, by the term "particular faith," may mean something like a "particular kind of faith."

¹⁴ The second entrance of a firmer faith, in other words was what moved the man from believing that Christ could help, to real discipleship.

Calvin goes on to point out that this teachableness, which he is calling “implicit faith,” however far short it is from true faith, is far different from the medieval custom of sluggishly resting in sheer ignorance while professing to believe whatever the church teaches.

Topic: *The relation of faith to the Word; and faith’s definition* (sec 6-7)

Section 6 Faith rests upon God’s Word

Calvin: “This, then, is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father: namely, clothed with his gospel.”

This quotation is a very fundamental statement, repeated by Reformed teachers even to this day. Therefore, let us look at the parts of this quotation:

1. The whole Christ is to be received, AND
2. He is received under the terms (the clothing) of the gospel.

Calvin: “For just as he has been appointed as the goal of our faith, so we cannot take the right road to him unless the gospel goes before us. And there [in the gospel], surely, the treasures of grace are opened to us; for if they had been closed, Christ would have benefited us little.”

Calvin is at pains to show that entry into the Kingdom of God, is gained by faith in the Word. Calvin teaches this from the whole Word (both Testaments), but especially from the Word of the gospel, which so preeminently emphasizes the centrality of faith:

“Yet I do not so restrict faith to the gospel without confessing that what sufficed for building it up had been handed down by Moses and the prophets.¹⁵ But, because a fuller manifestation of Christ has been revealed in the gospel, Paul justly calls it the ‘doctrine of faith’ “ [1 Tim 4:6¹⁶].¹⁷ For this reason, he says in another passage that by the coming of faith the law was abolished [Rom 10:4¹⁸; Gal 3:25¹⁹]. He understands by this term the new

¹⁵ This sentence is somewhat difficult to follow. The background is this: Calvin has previously taught that saving faith, before Christ, was always faith in the Christ to come [Book II, Chap VI]. He has also previously taught that the expression of Messianic doctrine peculiar to the New Covenant is called “the gospel” [Book II, Chap IX]. So when Calvin says he “does not so restrict faith to the gospel,” he means that he does not restrict true faith in the Messiah to the New Covenant revelation. In other words, what sufficed for building up faith has also been handed down by Moses and the prophets.

¹⁶ **I Timothy 4:6 ¶** If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained.

¹⁷ But, having stated his proviso in the previous sentence, Calvin now says that because a fuller manifestation of Christ has been revealed in the gospel of the New Covenant, Paul justly calls the gospel the “doctrine of faith.” Paul also says, similarly:

Galatians **3:23-24** ²³ But before [the] faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. ²⁴ Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

¹⁸ **Romans 10:4** ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

¹⁹ **Galatians 3:24-25** ²⁴ Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

and extraordinary kind of teaching by which Christ, after he became our teacher, has more clearly set forth the mercy of the Father, and has more surely testified to our salvation.”²⁰

All this to emphasize the centrality of faith, in order to the reception of the Kingdom of God.

First, we must be reminded that there is a permanent relationship between faith and the Word. ... For this reason, God exclaims in The Book of Isaiah: “Hear me and your soul shall live” [55:3]. And John shows this same wellspring of faith in these words: “These things have been written that you may believe” [John 20:31]. ... To this corresponds the fact that the Evangelists commonly use the words “believers” and “disciples” as synonyms. This is especially Luke’s usage in The Acts of the Apostles [many references].

After emphasizing the centrality of faith, Calvin then says:

Therefore if faith turns away even in the slightest degree from this goal toward which it should aim, it does not keep its own nature, but becomes uncertain credulity and vague error of mind. The same Word is the basis whereby faith is supported and sustained; if it turns away from the Word, it falls. Therefore, take away the Word and no faith will then remain.²¹ ...

We say that the Word itself ... is like a mirror in which faith may contemplate God.²² God ... always represents himself through his Word to those whom he wills to draw to himself. And for this reason, Paul defines faith as that obedience which is given to the gospel²³ [Rom 1:5], and elsewhere praises allegiance to faith in Philipians [Phil 1:3-5]. ...

Sec 7 Faith arises from God’s promise of grace in Christ

Calvin, having founded the reality of faith in God’s Word alone, now asks the question: What part of God’s Word is the central focus of faith?

But since man’s heart is not aroused to faith at every word of God, we must find out at this point what, strictly speaking, faith looks to in the Word. God’s word to Adam was, “You shall surely die” [Gen 2:17]. ... But these words are so far from being capable of establishing faith that they can of themselves do nothing but shake it. In the meantime, we do not deny that it is the function of faith to subscribe to God’s truth whenever and whatever and however it speaks. But we ask only what faith finds in the Word of the Lord upon which to lean and rest. Where our conscience sees only indignation and vengeance, how can it fail to tremble and be afraid? or to shun the God whom it dreads? Yet faith ought to seek God, not to shun him.

²⁰ You can refer to the notes for classes 6 and 7 for clarification of Calvin’s “covenant theology.”

²¹ One might point out that the “fallen faith” that has lost its focus on God’s Word by focusing on something else may still be a zealous faith, even a fanatical faith, demanding self-sacrifice and other things -- one thinks of Islamic faith in this regard. However, it’s not the faith of the Bible. Trust in a false god is not faith at all.

²² If the mirror is taken away, then something else is contemplated by “faith,” but true faith disappears. In other words Biblical faith is not a psychological characteristic, but a response to the Word. This is very important, as it affects the definition of faith.

²³ **Romans 1:5** By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name:

The “obedience of faith” in a passage like this is not a reference to the obedience (of works) that springs from faith, but is a reference to the obedience of believing (instead of not believing) the gospel.

It is plain, then, that we do not yet have a full definition of faith, inasmuch as merely to know something of God's will is not to be accounted faith. But what if we were to substitute his benevolence or his mercy in place of his will, the tidings of which are often sad and the proclamation frightening? Thus, surely, we shall more closely approach the nature of faith; for it is after we have learned that our salvation rests with God that we are attracted to seek him. ... Accordingly, we need the promise of grace, which can testify to us that the Father is merciful -- since we can approach him in no other way, and upon grace alone the heart of man can rest.

On this basis the psalms commonly yoke these two, mercy and truth, as if they were mutually connected; for it would not help us at all to know that God is true unless he mercifully attracted us to himself. ... For it will be rash for us to decide that God is well disposed toward us unless he give witness of himself, and anticipate us by his call, that his will [to bless us] may not be doubtful or obscure. But we have already seen that the sole pledge of his love is Christ, without whom the signs of hatred and wrath are everywhere evident. ...

Therefore our mind must be otherwise illumined and our heart strengthened, that the Word of God may obtain full faith among us. Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.