

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 [part 3]

The estimated schedule for Book III, Chapter II is as follows:

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
Review: The Definition of Faith	14-15	Jan 13, 2008
Faith and Assurance	16-21	"
Faith and The Fear of God	22-28	Jan 20
The Basis of Faith	29-32	"
Faith Revealed in Our Hearts by the Spirit	33-37	Jan 27
Refutation of Scholastic Objections	38-40	"
Relation of Faith to Hope and Love	41-43	"

Let us first review briefly what was covered in the previous class last semester:

Jesus Christ is the object of faith:

- 1) Calvin reviewed the logic that underlies the Gospel: The dreadful sentence of eternal death is pronounced over all those who break the Law of God, since it is utterly beyond our strength and ability to fulfill the law to the letter. But, the means of liberation is the appearance of Christ the Redeemer, through whom the mercy and pity of God come to us, provided we receive, in confidence, the promise of mercy and rest in it with steadfast hope.
- 2) Jesus Christ is the object of faith, since Christ says of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."
- 3) True faith is based upon true knowledge of this gospel, whether that knowledge is strong or weak.
- 4) The knowledge of the gospel is found in the Word of God. In particular, the knowledge of the gospel is to [1] receive Christ as he is offered by the Father, [2] clothed with his gospel.
- 5) Therefore, understanding what word from God is the gospel is vital. Calvin teaches that by faith we believe the whole word, "But since man's heart is not aroused to [gospel] faith at every word of God (such as words of doom and judgment), we must find out at this point what, strictly speaking, faith looks to in the Word" upon which to seek gospel rest.
- 6) Calvin identifies the word of the gospel in the promise of grace, which testifies to us that the Father is merciful in Christ, since we can approach him in no other way. Thus, Calvin states that upon grace alone can the heart of man rest.

- 7) Calvin concludes with the following Trinitarian definition of faith¹ (every word of which is important):

“Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it
 a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us²,
 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.”

The consequence of Calvin’s teaching in these sections is that our true assurance as real Christians is signified by these things:

1. Faith which rests in the grace of God, especially in the forgiveness of sins.
2. Faith which reaches the heart.
3. Faith in God as Father, evidenced by calling upon him in this way.
4. Keeping a good conscience (which proceeds from perpetual repentance, and receiving the forgiveness of sins).
5. Perseverance in faith through difficulties.

Calvin also wishes to speak to our lack of certainty in our faith. This is a problem for us, because

³unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful. Especially when it comes to reality itself, every man’s wavering uncovers hidden weakness. And not without cause the Holy Spirit with such notable titles ascribes authority to the Word of God. He wishes to cure the disease I have mentioned so that among us God may obtain full faith in his promises.⁴ ... Surely, as often as God commends his Word to us, he indirectly rebukes us for our unbelief, for he has no other intention than to uproot perverse doubts from our hearts.⁵

¹ From Chapter II, section 7.

² He means us – individually.

³ From Chapter II, section 15.

⁴ It’s important that the personal defect isn’t best viewed as a lack of “strength” in one of our attribute of faith, but a lack of trust in God’s attribute of goodness in Christ, and his promise of salvation. Our weakness of faith is not due to a lack of effort on our part to “work it up,” but is due to a lack of trust in the promises of God. This has to be remedied by hearing those promises -- over and over

⁵ Our faith is in the goodness and strength of God, not in the strength of our faith.

Calvin also complains that there are very many who, though they recognize the availability of God's grace for others, yet have little confidence that it will come to themselves, or rather, that they will come to it. This is because they confine the kindness of God within too narrow limits.

But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God's goodness clearly manifested for us [Col 2:2⁶; 1 Thess 1:5⁷; Heb 6:11; 10:22⁸]. But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves. For this reason, the apostle derives confidence from faith, and from confidence, in turn, boldness. For he states: "Through Christ we have boldness and access with confidence which is through faith in him" [Eph 3:12]. By these words he obviously shows that there is no right faith except when we dare⁹ with tranquil hearts to stand in God's sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation. This is so true that the word "faith" is very often used for confidence.

16. The chief hinge of faith

Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls "peace" [Rom 5:1], ... Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God's judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbed alarm, and almost torn to pieces; unless perhaps, forgetting God and self, it for the moment sleeps. And truly for the moment, for it does not long enjoy that miserable forgetfulness without the memory of divine judgment repeatedly coming back and very violently rending it.¹⁰ Briefly, he alone is truly a believer¹¹ who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation. As the apostle points out in these words: "If we hold our confidence and glorying in hope, firm even to the end" [Heb 3:7]. Thus, he considers that no one hopes well in the Lord except him who confidently glories in the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom. No man is a believer, I say, except him who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death; ...

⁶ **Colossians 2:1** ¶ For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and *for* as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

⁷ **1 Thessalonians 1:5** ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

⁸ **Hebrews 10:22** ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

⁹ The use of the word "dare" is important here. It's not presumptuous to dare to rest your full weight on God's promises, even though the world, the flesh, and the devil say "Don't dare"!

¹⁰ This sounds autobiographical.

¹¹ The term "believer" is a critical one for Calvin. By this he means the truly converted.

An Aside on Christian Assurance in its historical development:

Calvin thus ties faith and assurance together, just as he in other places ties together faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit, or faith and deliverance from the dominion (if not the presence) of sin.

Now, this close tie of faith and “full assurance” is a connection not approved as accurate by some of the English Puritans, in the generations after Calvin. Because of the respect for the Puritan heritage, you may also encounter Reformed churches today that do not appear to take Calvin’s position. Therefore, this difference needs to be understood.

For Calvin, assurance is the natural accompaniment to real faith in the gospel of the grace of God. Only in a secondary sense is our assurance strengthened by the sight of our spiritual progress over time (sanctification). However, for those of the later Reformed who do not agree with Calvin, the order is reversed. For them, assurance that one has true faith is primarily based in spiritual progress. This takes time. Therefore, a sense of full assurance is delayed – perhaps for a long time, even for a lifetime. Therefore, for these later theologians, there are two stages of faith. The first stage is insight into the gospel, leading to conversion and justification, but not necessarily much assurance. The second stage, perhaps a long time later, is the insight, based on inward evidence of progress, that one has truly accepted the gospel. This is supposed to lead to “full assurance.”

Calvin (and Luther) oppose this later development.

Now, scholars have written books about this change in the doctrine of faith and assurance. Other scholars debate them. For my part, as simply a reader of these scholars, I agree with those who say there is a material change.

It seems to me that the change came about this way:

Preachers and teachers came to a conviction that people were living by a false assurance, and that their profession of faith should be questioned in many cases.¹² Therefore, for many theological reasons which we cannot go into here, full assurance was taught to be a fruit of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Persons were taught that they should not naively presume that their faith is genuine. They should have evidence. They should come to know by the experience of sanctification that their faith is valid, rather than just “daring” to rest on Christ, as Calvin said. But, Calvin sees, and the Scripture teaches, that assurance is necessary for Christian growth. Calvin has just said so in our passage. Hindering the assurance of believers hinders their spiritual growth and depresses their spirituality. It’s self-defeating. Also, the later teaching of delayed assurance is based on the idea that self-examination for spiritual fruits is the way for a person to be sure that he is not “falsely converted.” But, Calvin is not naïve. In fact, Calvin will say (in later chapters): How do you know that the righteousness you think you see in yourself means that you are saved, rather than that the sin you surely still see remaining means you are not?

¹² In many cases, it is surely true that there are those whose confidence is more in themselves than in Christ. But, the question is, how to deal with it.

Our only hope lies not in our spiritual “accomplishments,” but in Christ’s accomplishments. We do not look within ourselves to find assurance. We look at Christ and what he did for our assurance.

Remember Calvin’s Will, which we read in the first class last semester:

... But alas! The desire which I have had, and the zeal, if so it must be called, has been so cold and so sluggish that I feel myself a debtor in everything and everywhere, and that, were it not for his infinite goodness, all the affection I have had would be but as smoke, nay, that even the favors which he has accorded me would be render me so much more guilty; so that my only recourse is this, that being the Father of mercies he will show himself the Father of so miserable a sinner.

All saints die talking like this, because at the last moment they see all their labors and efforts as smoke, and rely entirely on the grace of God. The Judge will discern in them the good works he has gifted them with, and reward them later.

Therefore, Calvin does not spend his time questioning people’s assurance, in some kind of plan to make sure that people are saved for sure. Calvin thinks that the Scriptural approach is for everyone to continue to encourage themselves to believe the Gospel, with full confidence in the grace of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit knows how to apply the gospel inwardly and kindle the true and living faith. We can announce the gospel, but the Spirit does the work of converting. Therefore, we should at all times turn from our sins and believe the gospel, hope in God’s grace, pray for one another, and be patient in all cases.

... we are taught from that masterly summation of Paul: I have confessed that “neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come ... can separate us from the love of God which embraces us in Christ Jesus” [Rom 8:38-9]. Thus, in the same manner, the apostle does not consider the eyes of our minds well illumined, except as we discern what the hope of the eternal inheritance is to which we have been called [Eph 1:18]. And everywhere he so teaches as to intimate that we cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather from it the fruit of great assurance.

Now, having made these confident statements, Calvin recognizes that reality seems to be a little different, a good bit of the time.

17. Faith in the struggle against temptation

Class 14 paused at this point, being out of time. Coverage of the material will resume at the next class.

Still, someone will say: “Believers experience something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith.” Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-mentioned doctrine¹³ to stand.

¹³ That is, his teaching in section 16.

Calvin goes on to say that we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, nor any assurance not assailed by some anxiety. In fact, believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. The spiritual rest on Christ, which is characteristic of true faith, exists in spite of the tumult brought about by the unbelief of the flesh.

As an example, Calvin quotes David. David, with innumerable complaints declares how unquiet his mind always was. "Why do you tremble," he says, "my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God" [Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5]. Or, "I have said in my alarm, I am cast away from the sight of thine eyes" [Ps 31:22].

In despair he condemns himself to death, and not only confesses himself to be troubled with doubt, but, as if he had fallen in the struggle, he feels that there is nothing left to him. For God has forsaken him, and has turned his hand, which was once his help, to his destruction. So he justifiably urges his soul to return to its repose [Ps 116:7] because he had experienced what it was to be tossed among stormy waves.

But, says Calvin, the characteristic of true faith is that it rises up through all these difficulties and is not destroyed by them.

So, David, even when he might have seemed overwhelmed, in rebuking himself did not cease to rise up to God. He who, struggling with his own weakness, presses toward faith in his moments of anxiety is already in large part victorious. ...

Here, then, is the proper reward and penalty of unbelief: so to tremble as to turn aside from God when one does not open the door for himself by faith.

But, on the other hand, believers whom the weight of temptation bends down and almost crushes constantly rise up, although not without difficulty and trouble. ...

Calvin has now taught two perspectives:

1. Faith is connected with great assurance.
2. Faith is warred against by the forces of evil (the world, the flesh, and the devil) and is in constant tumult.

How, then, are these two perspectives to be understood?

18. The conflict in the heart of the believer

In order to understand this, it is necessary to return to that division of flesh and spirit which we have mentioned elsewhere. It most clearly reveals itself at this point. Therefore the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is

- Partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness,
Partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity;
- Partly rests upon the promise of the gospel,
Partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity;

- Partly rejoices at the expectation of life,
Partly shudders at death.

This variation arises from imperfection of faith, since in the course of the present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith. Hence arise those conflicts, when unbelief, which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith that has been inwardly conceived.

But if in the believing mind certainty is mixed with doubt, do we not always come back to this, that faith does not rest in a certain and clear knowledge, but only in an obscure and confused knowledge of the divine will toward us? Not at all. For even if we are distracted by various thoughts, we are not on that account completely divorced from faith. Nor if we are troubled on all sides by the agitation of unbelief, are we for that reason immersed in its abyss. If we are struck, we are not for that reason cast down from our position. For the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it.

19. Even weak faith is real faith

Calvin goes on to say that when even the least drop of faith is instilled into our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and gracious toward us, even if afar off. We know we are not deceived by this. Then, as we advance in the faith, the sight becomes clearer. Ignorance is gradually dispelled. But, in any case, we have a clear knowledge of the grace of God. Therefore, even though we are aware of our darkness, we are also definitely aware of the distant vision, which the flesh cannot suppress, and which comes closer to us every day.

20. The weakness and strength of faith

Calvin quotes Paul to show that "we know in part and prophesy in part" [1 Cor 13:9,12], and "see in a mirror dimly" [1 Cor 13:12]. This is faith's weakness. Yet at the same time, with uncovered face and no veil intervening, we see God's glory in the face of Christ, with such effect that we are transformed into his very likeness [2 Cor 3:18]. This is faith's strength.

And, in speaking of the many and varied temptations that strike us to hinder our faith, Calvin says the worst is the temptation of conscience:

But it is especially our conscience itself that, weighed down by a mass of sins, now complains and groans, now accuses itself, now murmurs secretly, now breaks out in open tumult. And so, whether adversities reveal God's wrath, or the conscience finds in itself the proof and ground thereof, then unbelief obtains weapons and devices to overthrow faith. Yet these are always directed to this objective: that, thinking God to be against us and hostile to us, we should not hope for any help from him, and should fear him as if he were our deadly enemy.

The practical consequence of this advice is that when we feel that God has most grounds to be angry with us, we should always approach him on the grounds of his grace expressed Christ, not flee him. For when we are satisfied with ourselves, it may be that God our Father is not satisfied, and is preparing discipline for our good; but when we are in spiritual distress, and repentantly confess-

ing our sins and approaching God by the means that he has ordained, then assuredly he is pleased with us!

21. The Word of God as the shield of faith

To bear these attacks faith arms and fortifies itself with the Word of the Lord. And when any sort of temptation assails us – suggesting that God is our enemy because he is unfavorable toward us – faith, on the other hand, replies that while he afflicts us he is also merciful because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath. When one is stricken by the thought that God is Avenger of iniquities, faith sets over against this the fact that his pardon is ready for all iniquities whenever the sinner betakes himself to the Lord's mercy. Thus the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy. Rather, all the contentions that try and weary it result in the certainty of this assurance. A proof of this is that while the saints seem to be very greatly pressed by God's vengeance, yet they lay their complaints before him; and when it seems that the will not at all be heard, they nonetheless call upon him.¹⁴ ... Thus the disciples whom Christ rebuked for the smallness of their faith complained that they were perishing, and yet were imploring his help [Matt 8:25-26]. Indeed, while he reproves them for their little faith, he does not cast them out from the ranks of his disciples or count them among unbelievers, but urges them to shake off that fault. ... The root of faith can never be torn from the godly breast, but clings so fast to the inmost parts that, however faith seems to be shaken or to bend this way or that, its light is never so extinguished or snuffed out that it does not at least lurk as it were beneath the ashes. And this example shows that the Word, which is an incorruptible seed, brings forth fruit like itself, whose fertility never wholly dries up and dies. The ultimate cause of despair for the saints is to feel God's hand in their ruin, taking into account things present. And yet Job declares that his hope will extend so far that even if God should slay him he will not for that reason cease to hope in him [Job 13:15]. The matter stands thus: Unbelief does not hold sway within believers' hearts, but assails them from without.¹⁵

Calvin goes on to compare faith – the shield against Satan's fiery darts – to a soldier's shield. He may receive blows on his shield that make him give ground. Perhaps the shield is even damaged at some point. However, the spiritual warriors shield of faith never gives way entirely, and always becomes fresh, whole and strong again. Those who wield it gain the triumph in the end, because being tested on the battlefield by faithful use of the shield of faith (which is capable of deflecting all the fiery arrows if used), these spiritual soldiers become stronger with each battle, and are again ready to enter the fight.

Thus, if we may judge from the outcome, believers not only emerge safely from every battle, so that, having received fresh strength, they are shortly after ready to descend again into the arena; but besides, what John says in his canonical letter is also fulfilled: "This is the victory that overcomes the world, your faith" [1 John 5:4]. And he affirms that our faith will be victor not only in one battle, or a few, or against any particular assault; but that, though it be assailed a thousand times, it will prevail over the entire world.

¹⁴ We remember Christ's words on the cross: "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?" This is the response of the godly.

¹⁵ Calvin sees the heart as the controlling factor. What has supremacy in the heart has supremacy in the whole man.