

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

CONCLUDING:

CHAPTER II FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED [PART 4]

BEGINNING:

CHAPTER III OUR REGENERATION BY FAITH: REPENTANCE

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
Chapter II Faith (concluding today) The Foundation of Faith	29-30	Jan 27, 2008
Chapter III Repentance Repentance, the fruit of faith	1-3	Jan 27

The notes for last week's class do contain the final, full presentation of all the material that I intended to present in written form for Calvin's chapter on Faith. However, I ran out of time during that class, and the lecture on the material in the last two numbered sections 29 and 30 was highly abbreviated. Several class members expressed the desire that this material be discussed more completely this week. Therefore, I've reproduced those last two sections of last week's notes here, for your convenience. The material may be updated in a few places.

Chapter II, "Faith," Sections 29-3029. God's promise the object and support of faith

Calvin now returns to a subject he has visited earlier in this chapter on faith, in order to form a conclusion. This has to do with faith's attitude toward the different strands of thought in the Scripture. Following is Calvin's main thesis:

We make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly<sup>1</sup> rests.

What Calvin means is that the strand of teaching in the Scripture upon which we rest our faith, is the promise of God.

Now Calvin goes on to admit that true faith has a broad view of the whole Word, and yet the central focus of faith is the comfort-giving promise, not the threats, commandments and prohibitions:

Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly<sup>2</sup> begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.

<sup>1</sup> The term "properly" is used in the sense of "correspondingly." Faith logically and peculiarly corresponds to promise.

Furthermore, the central focus on God's promise affects the "look and feel" of the Christian life:

For in God faith seeks life: a life that is not found in commandments or declarations of penalties, but in the promise of mercy, and only in a freely given promise.

For a conditional promise that sends us back to our own works does not promise life unless we discern its presence in ourselves. Therefore, if we would not have our faith tremble and waver, we must buttress it with the promise of salvation, which is willingly and freely offered to us by the Lord in consideration of our misery rather than our deserts.

Calvin now begins to describe again his New Covenant doctrine of faith:

The apostle, therefore, bears this witness to the gospel:<sup>3</sup> that it is the word of faith [Rom 10:8]. He distinguishes the gospel both from the precepts of the law and from the promises,<sup>4</sup> since there is nothing that can establish faith except that generous embassy by which God reconciles the world to himself [2 Cor 5:19-20].<sup>5</sup>

Thence, also, arises that frequent correlation of faith and gospel in the apostle, when he teaches that the ministry of the gospel is committed to him to further "obedience to the faith" [Rom 1:5], that "it is the power of God for salvation to every believer; ... in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" [Rom 1:16-17]. And no wonder! Indeed, since the gospel is the "ministry of reconciliation" [2 Cor 5:18], no other sufficiently firm testimony of God's benevolence to us exists, the knowledge of which faith seeks.

Therefore, when we say that faith must rest upon a freely given promise, we do not deny that believers embrace and grasp the Word of God in every respect: but we point out the promise of mercy as the proper goal of faith.<sup>6</sup> As on the one hand believers ought to recognize God to be Judge and Avenger of wicked deeds, yet on the other hand they properly<sup>7</sup> contemplate his kindness, since he is so described to them as to be considered "one who is kind" [Ps 86:5], "and merciful" [Ps 103:8], "far from anger and of great goodness," "sweet to all" [Ps 144:9vg], "pouring out his mercy upon all his works" [Ps 145:9].

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<sup>2</sup> When speaking of faith in the truth of Scripture, faith proper might be described as saving faith in the gospel. Whereas, faith in the broad sense would be faith in the whole Word of God.

<sup>3</sup> In Calvin, "gospel" is a New Covenant word, even though he teaches that the ancient believers were saved through faith in Christ-to-come, just as we are saved by faith in the Christ who has come.

<sup>4</sup> I believe that what Calvin means here is the promise of Christ-to-come in the Old Testament, but I could stand to be corrected. Otherwise Calvin usually makes gospel and promise pretty much equivalent. I only raise this question of detailed interpretation because Calvin seems to use 'promise' in two different ways in these sections. This does not confuse our understanding of the drift of his teaching, however.

<sup>5</sup> The centrality of faith is more preeminent in the New Covenant, and more clearly characterizes the religion. Paul can say, (<sup>NKJ</sup> Galatians 3:25) "But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." He refers to the regimentation that was imposed upon the people through Moses, as characteristic of that age, and speaks of the characteristic of this age as the age of faith.

<sup>6</sup> Faith and promise uniquely correspond to one another. This is why Calvin can say that faith's proper goal is God's promise, or the gospel. The word "proper," as used here does not mean that faith's allegiance to all of God's Word is "improper," meaning wrong. The word "proper" is being used in the this manner: "the town proper, excluding the suburbs."

<sup>7</sup> Again notice the special use of the word "proper."

### 30. Why faith depends solely on the promise of grace

Calvin has objectors to his insistent and definite doctrine of faith – namely, his idea that though faith believes the whole Word, faith rests in the word of promise only. He continues defending himself, by dealing with a counter-example which evidently has been brought against his teaching:

... I admit [he means, to his objectors], as I have already said, that God's truth is, as they [people in general; or his objectors] call it, the common object of faith, whether he threaten or hold out hope of grace. Therefore, the apostle attributes to faith the fact that Noah feared the world's destruction when it was not as yet visible [Heb 11:7].<sup>8</sup> If fear of imminent punishment was the product of faith, then threats ought not to be excluded from the definition of it [that is, the definition of faith, Calvin's objectors say]. This is indeed true.

But our slanderers unjustly charge us with denying, as it were, that faith has regard to all parts of the Word of God. It is our intention to make only these two points: first, that faith does not stand firm until a man attains to the freely given promise;<sup>9</sup> secondly, that it does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ. Both points are worth noting.

It is as if Calvin is saying this: If anyone wants to say of true, scriptural faith, that it produces the kind of fear which is the product of faith (not the fleshly kind of fear which is the product of unbelief), and to do this without denying the central focus on promise and its accompanying assurance, then that is acceptable to Calvin. Faith that rests on the gospel ought to produce godly fear, even though faith is not fear, in its own nature. On the other hand, if anyone who is objecting to what Calvin is saying wants to change the definition of faith, so that it is no longer centrally (“properly”) focused on rest in the promise, then that is wrong, and contrary to the Scriptural doctrine of faith. Calvin says:

We seek a faith that distinguishes the children of God from the wicked, and believers from unbelievers.

He means that a teaching that we should be in doubt about our assurance, which is what some of his objectors have in mind, does not perform this distinguishing function.

Furthermore:

If someone believes that God both justly commands all that he commands and truly threatens, shall he therefore be called a believer? By no means!

It is only faith in the gospel that makes a real believer.

Therefore, there can be no firm condition of faith unless it rests upon God's mercy. Now, what is our purpose in discussing faith? Is it not that we may grasp the way of salvation?<sup>10</sup> But how can there be saving faith except in so far as it engrafts us in the body of Christ?<sup>11</sup> Accordingly,

<sup>8</sup> Godly fear did not stand on its own two feet, apart from faith, but is the product of faith.

<sup>9</sup> That is, faith must find a promise to rest on, or it is just not gospel faith.

<sup>10</sup> He means by “grasping the way of salvation,” not a way of doubt.

<sup>11</sup> That is, it does engraft, and we know it.

when we define it there is no absurdity in our thus emphasizing its particular effect ... . In short, in this doctrine the malicious have nothing to carp at without implicating Paul in the same censure with us, who rightly calls the gospel “the word of faith” [Rom 10:8].

I will add the following: Calvin’s objectors are probably saying that the comfort-based definition of faith that Calvin gives will lead to antinomianism – the idea that the high standard of God’s Law is no longer significant, and that repentance and striving for holiness are not important. Keeping people in doubt, Calvin’s objectors say, keeping them working for their salvation, or for the assurance of it, is the more sure way to gain obedience.

But, Calvin knows that though the hypocrites may say, “Justification is by faith alone, therefore I don’t need to repent,” the spiritual comfort of the gospel is the means by which the Spirit calls the elect to Christ, and creates and motivates holiness among the believers. Paul says,

*Romans 5:19 - 6:4* For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?<sup>12</sup> Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.<sup>13</sup>

Walking in newness of life is not a search for assurance through moral behavior, but walking in that assured, baptized faith which creates holiness and godliness.

### Chapter III, “Repentance”

#### 1. Repentance as a consequence of faith

Even though we have taught in part how faith possesses Christ, and how through it we enjoy his benefits, this would still remain obscure if we did not add an explanation of the effects we feel. With good reason, the sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins [Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31]. Any discussion of faith, therefore, that omitted these two topics would be barren and mutilated and well-nigh useless.<sup>14</sup> Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins – that is, newness of life [corresponding to repentance] and free reconciliation [corresponding to forgiveness of sins] – are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith. As a consequence, reason and the order of teaching demand that I begin to discuss both at this point. However, our immediate transition will be from faith to repentance. For [a] when this topic is rightly understood it will better appear how man is justified by faith alone, and simple

<sup>12</sup> This is what Paul’s objectors, one way or another, were saying about the doctrine of grace – too much grace, super-abounding grace that triumphs over all our sin, is a bad influence and not conducive to holiness.

<sup>13</sup> But Paul’s answer is that our baptism into Christ – a finished work – separates us from the dominion of sin, and frees us to obey – which we need to be careful to do.

<sup>14</sup> Repentance (change of mind; Christian growth; sanctification) and forgiveness of sins (justification by faith) are the “two graces” that follow our union with Christ, as Calvin constantly teaches.

pardon; [b] nevertheless actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness.

Comment [a], above, is probably to be understood this way: Calvin's doctrine of repentance, in common with that of the Reformation in general, denies the need for acts of personal satisfaction for sin that were an essential part of the Roman conception of penance (repentance). Since man cannot provide any satisfaction for his own sins, under any circumstances, he remains utterly dependent on the satisfaction that was provided once and for all on the cross. This focuses attention back on Christ and on faith during repentance, and highlights the justification and free pardon we receive from Christ. We cannot earn any part of it. But, comment [b] goes on to make the point that free imputation is associated with some kind of "so to speak" actual holiness. The "so to speak" is written because the holiness we actually see in ourselves is only relative, and in no sense absolute, in a way which will be described later by Calvin.

Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance. There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith, rather than flows from it, or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance, and are moved to feel this way by an unduly slight argument.

When Calvin says that persons who believe repentance precedes faith "have never known the power of repentance," I think he is thinking this way: If repentance precedes faith, then when faith comes, repentance is over. But, repentance is an essential aspect of the real Christian life, not something that is over when we finally come to faith. Therefore, people are mistaken who think that repentance only has to do with the somber emotions of doom, judgment, sadness, bondage, or whatever, which frightened them before they rested in the gospel. Since they have mis-identified what repentance is, they have not experienced the power of that repentance which follows faith and is engendered by it.

## 2. Repentance has its foundation in the gospel, which faith embraces

Calvin now deals with an objection to his doctrine: Scripture writers say "repent and believe the gospel," as if repentance comes before faith. But, Calvin says that the call to repentance is within the context of the preaching of the gospel, so that the phrase could be put this way: "repent, because the gospel has come." The call to repentance comes from the fact that the gospel is being preached.

This clearly shows Calvin's fundamental understanding, expressed elsewhere as well, that repentance and obedience are never to be expected from anyone, unless those who are called see that God has opened the door by his free acceptance of sinners, and see his willingness to receive those who are called upon to repent and obey. In addition, it is clearly stated throughout the Institutes

that the fundamental doctrine of God that we must keep in view is his goodness. All faith, repentance and obedience is the product of his goodness and a conscious response to it.

... Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace. These matters will be more clearly discussed in what follows.

Perhaps some have been deceived by the fact that many are overwhelmed by qualms of conscience or compelled to obedience before they are imbued with the knowledge of grace, nay, even taste it. And this is the initial fear that certain people reckon among the virtues, for they discern that it is close to true and just obedience. But here it is not a question of how variously Christ draws us to himself, or prepares us for the pursuit of godliness.

What Calvin means is that the experience of conversion differs from person to person. The so-called "repentance" or spiritual distress that precedes faith's resting on Christ, is only a preparatory thing. But that is not the repentance that follows faith.<sup>15</sup>

I say only that no uprightness can be found except where that Spirit reigns that Christ received to communicate to his members. Secondly, I say that, according to the statement of the psalm: "There is propitiation with thee ... that thou mayest be feared" [Ps 130:4], no one will ever reverence God but him who trusts that God is propitious to him. No one will gird himself willingly to observe the law but him who will be persuaded that God is pleased by his obedience. This tenderness in overlooking and tolerating vices is a sign of God's fatherly favor.

Calvin then goes on to complain about certain groups which teach an apparently temporary repentance, whereas Calvin is convinced that the spirit of repentance extends throughout the entire lifetime of the Christian.

### 3. Mortification and vivification

Calvin now takes up the terminology originally used by the Lutherans in describing repentance: "mortification"<sup>16</sup> and "vivification."<sup>17</sup>

But, certain men well versed in penance, even long before these times, meaning to speak simply and sincerely according to the rule of Scripture, said that it consists of two parts: mortification and vivification.<sup>18</sup> Mortification they explain as sorrow of soul and dread conceived from the recognition of sin and the awareness of divine judgment. For when anyone has been brought into a true knowledge of sin, he then begins truly to hate and abhor sin; then he is heartily displeased with himself, he confesses himself miserable and lost and wishes to be another man.

<sup>15</sup> If you did not have a dramatic conversion experience, or don't know when it happened, or are sad that you did not have such an experience, you can still have the repentance that God calls for, since it is born of that simple faith that rests for salvation on the completeness and thoroughness of what Christ did for us sinners on the cross.

<sup>16</sup> "Mortification" is "putting to death," and refers to putting the sinful desires of the flesh to death.

<sup>17</sup> "Vivification" is "making alive," and refers to the getting of spiritual life and righteousness through Christ and his Spirit.

<sup>18</sup> This is Philipp Melancthon in his *Loci Communes*, the first Protestant "Institutes."

Furthermore, when he is touched by any sense of the judgment of God (for the one straightway follows the other) he then lies stricken and overthrown; humbled and cast down he trembles; he becomes discouraged and despairs. This is the first part of repentance, commonly called "contrition." "Vivification" they understand as the consolation that arises out of faith. That is, when a man is laid low by the consciousness of sin and stricken by the fear of God, and afterward looks to the goodness of God – to his mercy, grace, salvation, which is through Christ – he raises himself up, he takes heart, he recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life. Now these words, if only they have a right interpretation, express well enough the force of repentance,<sup>19</sup> but when they understand vivification as the happiness that the mind receives after its perturbation and fear have been quieted, I do not agree. It means, rather, the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as if it were said that men dies to himself that he may begin to live to God.

As I interpret this, Calvin understands "vivification" as not just the emotional sense of freedom from doom which comes with faith in the gospel, but as a positive desire for holiness and new birth. In this sense, "vivification" is the exact counterpart toward righteousness that the term "mortification" is toward sin. A holistic personal spiritual move away from sin and toward righteousness tends both to put sins to death (mortification) and to bring righteousness to life (vivification).

Perhaps, in his criticism of the Lutheran teaching, Calvin may be thinking that the terms mortification and vivification need to be moved away from describing emotional states, and moved toward the objective process of killing off sin and coming to alive to holiness. But, let me make these points:

1. It's clear from Calvin's many statements about God's judgment and grace that he knows personally the feelings of doom and feelings of relief that are spoken of by the Lutherans, as he describes in the quotation. Calvin is not objecting to what is said about these states of mind. But, it seems to me that Calvin thinks he attaches a more objective meaning to the terms mortification and vivification. Mortification and vivification, for Calvin, refer not just to states of mind, which are reactions to sin and grace, but to a lifelong process in the Christian life.
2. Now, lest we leave the Lutheran position unexplained, that position is given in Melancthon's Loci Communes (1543 edition):

After we have explained the doctrine of reconciliation and faith [he means, justification by faith] it is necessary to add the doctrine concerning good works or the new obedience. Therefore I want to say clearly and plainly that our obedience, that is, the righteousness of a good conscience or of the good works which God has commanded us, must necessarily follow our reconciliation. For Christ clearly gives command regarding repentance, and Paul says, "We are debtors not to live after the flesh," Rom 8:12. Also 1 Cor 6:9, "Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor adulterers, nor idolaters, nor thieves ... will inherit the kingdom of God." 1 John 3:7-8, "Let no man deceive you. He who does righteousness is righteous. He who commits sin is of the

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<sup>19</sup> So repentance, as a whole, refers to the process of coming to life and righteousness in Christ. And, this process has two sides: putting sins to death and raising righteousness to life.

devil ... For this purpose the Son of God came that He might destroy the works of the devil." Thus we are born again in reconciliation [when our sins are forgiven] so that the new obedience might be begun in us. Likewise it is written to the Ephesians, 2:10, "We are His workmanship created through Christ Jesus unto good works which God has prepared that we should walk in them." This statement contains the teaching and the comfort which we need, for regarding the necessity of this teaching, it first says that we "have been created unto good works." Then there is comfort in the fact that he says that God has prepared beforehand those good works in the church, just as He prepared beforehand in Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others the marvelous works through which He both calls, governs, and preserves His church; and as He says in another place, "Strengthen, O God, that which You have wrought in us," Ps 68:28. Likewise Paul says that these good works have been prepared by God, that is, not only commanded, ordained, and begun by Him, but also aided and established. ...

So, authoritative Lutheran teaching in Calvin's day does take an objective position on the issue of repentance, definitely referring to the objective progress of sanctification in the Christian life, and not just to the states of mind (emotions) of fear and gladness.

### Commentary on this difference of opinion between Calvin and Melancthon

First: There is less difference between these men than one thinks. Second: There is a difference. In the spiritual warfare between flesh and spirit, one seeks for the power to live worthily according to the call of grace. What, then, is the source of this power? What is the balance between mourning our sins, the joy of forgiveness, and the earnest pursuit of obedience? What is the place of participation in the corporate worship of Word and Sacrament?

Based on some years of reading both Lutheran and Reformed sources on the doctrine of faith, assurance, and sanctification, I believe it is legitimate to compare ourselves this way:

1. The spiritually alive, evangelical Lutherans tend to take the position that the joy of forgiveness, especially as received in corporate worship through Word and Sacrament, is the objective, primary motivator and source of power for sanctification. But this blessing is definitely not enjoyed apart from earnest pursuit of obedience to the law of God. Whereas,
2. The spiritually alive, evangelical Reformed, while historically maintaining a high standard of corporate worship in Word and Sacrament, have often tended to take the position that the earnest pursuit of obedience takes precedence over the joy – without denying the joy.

Such comparisons can be dangerous. One can find grim Lutherans, and one can find joyful Reformed. There is a full spectrum of spiritual demeanor to be found on both sides. However, on this subject, I believe that we Reformed need to listen carefully to the Lutherans, and be taught by them. It is the acknowledgment of our sins, and the forgiveness of our sins, especially as received in corporate worship through Word and Sacrament, which is the main source of spiritual power to live the Christian life.

It is my opinion that we see this in our own church.