

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 15 – Part 1

DISCUSSION OF HUMAN NATURE AS CREATED, OF THE FACULTIES OF THE SOUL, OF THE
IMAGE OF GOD, OF FREE WILL, AND OF THE ORIGINAL INTEGRITY OF MAN'S NATURE

In this chapter Calvin enters into a discussion of the soul, the image of God and the fall. Though Calvin will discuss each of these ideas in more detail later in the book, this chapter provides both an overview and an introduction to his theology of humanity.

Summary: Calvin begins with the observation that “...we cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves.” (pg. 183) This is so because knowing who we were before the fall, namely the perfect image of God, who we are after the fall, namely corrupted human beings, and who we are after the work of Christ, namely redeemed humanity helps us understand the nature of God more fully; a God who has a plan to make humanity whole.

In order for us to know who we are, Calvin believes that we need to begin with the concept of the soul. The soul for Calvin is the immortal spirit which God gives to each human being. The soul is “*an immortal yet created essence, which is man's nobler part.*” (pg. 184) What this means is that the soul is first a creation of God and second that when it is freed in death, it returns to God. And even though people are afraid of death, Calvin believes that most human beings have a “*sense of their own immortality.*” (pg. 184) He also believes that this immortal soul is the “*seat of man's intelligence.*” (pg. 185)

Having clarified his understanding of the soul Calvin launches into a discussion of what it means that we are all created in the image of God. He begins by declaring that the image of God is spiritual and that it dwells within the soul. Though he is willing to accept some linkage between the physical body and the image of God, Calvin wants to be clear that God does not have a body like ours and so our bodies are not the image of God. Even so Calvin states that “*although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks (of God's image) did not glow (at creation and before the fall).*” (pg. 188)

Interestingly enough, Calvin does not spend much time trying to flesh out exactly what the image of God is. Calvin comes closest to a description of the image of God when he speaks of it as “*those faculties in which man excels, and in which he ought to (see) the reflection of God's glory.*” (pg. 189) These faculties include “*...knowledge, then pure righteousness and holiness*” (pg. 189) and can be seen most clearly in Jesus Christ, who is “*the most perfect image of God.*” (pg. 190) He sums it up this way. “*Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection.*” (pg. 190)

In this discussion Calvin also tells his readers what the image of God is not. It is not God's substance being shared with humanity (pg. 191) but is instead a gift of God. This is a critical understanding in that it insures that we know the difference between creator (God) and creatures (us).

Reflection: So what can we learn about God from the fact that we are made in God's image and that we have been given immortal souls? I believe that there are several things we can learn. First we learn that God created human beings to be in relationship with God's own self. God could have created human beings as just another animal operating out of pure instinct. Instead God made us with souls which begin and end with God. Second we learn that God loves humanity. We see this in God's gift of intelligence and rational thought; in our ability to “grasp things that are right, just, and honorable.” (pg. 185) Finally we learn that God desires that each of us discover how we can make this image live fully within us.

Questions:

1. How do you understand the concept of soul and spirit?
2. Do you believe the soul is immortal? Why or why not?
3. How do you understand what it means to be created in the image of God?