

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 15 – Part 2

DISCUSSION OF HUMAN NATURE AS CREATED, OF THE FACILITIES 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 a discussion of the soul, the image of God, human will 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: The question that confronts us is, if we are made in the image of God, why is the world so messed up? For Calvin, the answer is that the image of God was corrupted in the Fall. Even so, Calvin makes it clear that the image of God was never extinguished in human beings, but merely severely corrupted. *“Therefore, even though we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated in him (Adam), yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity.”* (pg. 189) The good news however is that in Jesus Christ we can be restored to *“true and complete integrity.”* (pg. 189) In this way *“...the end of regeneration is that Christ should reform us to God’s image.”* He quotes the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 3:18, that *“we...with unveiled face beholding the glory of Christ are being transformed into his very image.”* Thus since Christ is the *“most perfect image of God; if we are conformed to it, we are so restored that with true piety, righteousness, purity and intelligence we bear God’s image.”* (pg. 190)

Calvin next enters into a discussion of “understanding” and “will”, both of which are aspects of the soul. Understanding is the ability to see what is good, or which choices are *“worthy of approval or disapproval...”* (pg. 194) Will on the other hand is the ability to either choose to follow what is good or to flee from what is evil. These two “facilities” of the soul (understanding and will), as Calvin calls them, were both fully present in Adam at the beginning of time. *“Therefore God provided man’s soul with a mind by which to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong; and the light of reason as guide to distinguish what should be followed from what should be avoided....to this is joined the will, under whose control is choice.”* (pg. 195) This combination was so potent that, *“In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed to attain eternal life.”* (pg. 195) What Calvin means by this is that Adam and Eve had the understanding and the will to be obedient and thus choose to live eternally with God in the garden.

Unfortunately Adam’s will was *“capable of being bent to one side or the other, and was not given the constancy to persevere, that he fell so easily.”* (pg. 195) Thus his choice to disobey God was his and his alone and he is responsible for the fall. Calvin understands the arguments about the fall being God’s fault; that it was God who created Adam as fallible, yet *“...nor was it reasonable for God to be constrained by the necessity of making a man who either could not, or would not sin at all. Such a nature would have indeed been more excellent...(however)...no necessity was imposed upon God of giving man other than a mediocre and even transitory will...”* (pg. 196)

Reflection: One of the great struggles of human beings is to both know and do what is right and good. There are moments when we think we know what we ought to do, but can’t follow through. At other times we know what we ought not to do and yet we give in and do it anyway. Fortunately there are moments where we both know and do what is right. Calvin believes we don’t often get it right because our ability to will (do) what is right has been corrupted by the fall. Thus there is no longer “free will” again, because our ability to both see what is right and our will do it, have been damaged. He could point to war, violence, greed and the general state of the world to make his point. The challenge for us then is to be intentional about our choices that we might get it right more than we get it wrong.

Questions:

1. What do you think about human beings abilities to know what is the right thing to do?
2. Do you, or do you not believe that humans have free will? Why or why not?
3. Where in your own life have you struggled to both know and do what is right?