

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 16 - Part 1

HOW CHRIST FULFILLED THE FUNCTION OF REDEEMER TO ACQUIRE SALVATION FOR US. HERE, ALSO, HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION ARE DISCUSSED, AS WELL AS HIS ASCENT INTO HEAVEN

In this chapter Calvin focuses on the “how” of Jesus’ “saving work.” In so doing he will cover several portions of the Apostles’ Creed.

Summary: Calvin begins where all good Calvinists begin, with a reminder of the fallen/sinful state of human beings. This state according to Calvin is one of our being “...condemned, dead and lost in ourselves...” (pg. 503). He continues that, “No one can descend into himself and seriously consider what he is without feeling God’s wrath and hostility toward him...” which will lead human beings to “...anxiously seek ways and means to appease God...” (pg. 504). Even as Calvin lays out his view of our sinfulness and thus our deserving of the wrath of God, he also realizes that somehow God had to love us in order to have sent Jesus to save the world. “For how could he (God) have given us his only begotten Son a singular pledge of his love to us if he had not already embraced us with his free favor” (pg. 504)?

In some ways, this is a balancing act for Calvin because on the one hand Calvin believes that God is so holy that God “cannot love the unrighteousness that he sees in us all” (pg. 505). On the other hand, Calvin believes that, “...because the Lord wills not to lose what is his in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love. However, we remain sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures...thus he is moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace” (pg. 505-6). Calvin continues this line of thought by quoting Augustine. “God’s love is incomprehensible and unchangeable...he (God) has loved us before the world was created, that we might be his children along with his only begotten Son- before we became anything at all”ⁱ (pg. 506). Calvin sums up this balancing act by once again quoting Augustine. “God knew how at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made, and to love what he had made” (pg. 507). In a sense, he is saying God hates the sin but loves the sinner.

With the concept of God’s love for us established, Calvin moves forward with his discussion of how “Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us” (pg. 507). The answer is that Jesus accomplished this ‘...by the whole course of his obedience’ (pg. 507). Calvin understands Jesus’ saving work as having begun the instant Jesus “took the form of a servant” by being obedient to God’s will for his life. Even so Calvin makes it clear that it is in Christ’s death and resurrection that salvation was obtained and made real for us.

Calvin begins by discussing Jesus death. Jesus death mattered because Jesus took upon himself our sins. “The Son of God, utterly clean of all fault, nevertheless took upon himself the shame and reproach of our iniquities, and in return clothed us with his purity” (pg. 510). And in so doing, Christ “...gave himself over to its (death’s) power in order to deliver us from it” (pg. 511). Thus, Calvin leads us to the two outcomes of Jesus’ death which are “...liberation from the death to which we were bound, and mortification of the flesh (meaning we become new people)” (Pg. 512).

Reflection: How do you find the balance between a Holy God and a Loving God? This has always been the struggle for Christianity. Some churches have come down on the side of a Holy God who demands perfect obedience while others offer a God who is all loving and so cares little about sin. Calvin works diligently to find the balance between the two; such that we feel ourselves both called to a holier life while at the same time, knowing that we exist in God’s love.

Questions:

1. Do you see God as being more focused on judgment or on love? How so?
2. How do you balance the two?
3. What do you think of hating the sin and loving the sinner?

ⁱ Augustine, *John’s Gospel* cx 6