

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 16
REFUTATION OF FALSE ACCUSATIONS...UPON THIS DOCTRINE
(of justification by faith)

In this chapter, Calvin examines two criticisms of the doctrine/belief that God freely justifies us; meaning that God freely chooses us, forgives us and saves us without our having to do anything; and that our salvation comes to us through faith, which again God creates within us. Thus we are saved by faith and not works.

Summary: The two main criticisms of Calvin's view that justification (salvation) is a free gift received by faith, were, 1) that it made salvation too easy to receive (and thus it was not valued) and 2) that people will quit doing good works if they are not required for salvation. While Calvin is somewhat dismissive of these questions, he understands that they need to be answered. And his answers help us understand his beliefs more fully.

Calvin understands the criticism; that by teaching that "...justification (salvation) lies in the free remission of sins..." he is "...making the path to righteousness (salvation) too easy..." (pg. 797). And thereby "luring into sin, men who are already too much inclined to it on their own accord" (pg. 797). A way to look at this accusation is that just as people do not appreciate things in which they do not have "sweat equity," or for which they have not worked, those who do not have to work for their salvation will not appreciate it. And then they will simply return to their old ways of sin.

Calvin's response to this concern is that "For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works, nor a justification that stands without them. This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together..." (pg. 798). By this he wants to make clear that any meaningful faith, or relationship with God, has good works as an integral part. Calvin continues, "Why, then are we justified by faith? Because by faith we...are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also" (pg. 798). Sanctification is the word Calvin and others use to describe the process by which we become more and more Christ-like (saintly is the root of sanctification). Calvin's point is that faith is the conduit not only for salvation, but for God's work in us that pushes us to become more and more like Jesus. Thus people will not fall back into sin because God is pushing them in a different direction.

Calvin also understands the second concern, "...that men's hearts are seduced from desiring to do good when we take from them their regard for merit (meaning getting a reward for good works)" (pg. 798). Calvin's response is that people will want to do good works (show love) because they are responding to the love God has given them. "For if it is only a matter of men looking for reward when they serve God, and hiring and selling their labor to him, it is of little profit. God wills to be freely worshipped, freely loved. That worshipper, I say, is approved, when all hope of receiving reward has been cut out, still ceases not to serve him" (pg. 799). Calvin, has a deep love for God. He believes that other Christians will find within themselves the love of God which will then motivate them to do good, even when there is no eternal reward.

Reflection: Calvin believes in the complete transformation of people who have been touched by the hand of God. He believes that while people will not be perfect, they will be better. And part of that being better is a desire to show forth the love of God in the world. In fact, Calvin sees good works as a demonstration of one's having been saved by the free love and grace of God. So for those of us who are followers of Jesus, we need to remember that loving others through good works is a hallmark of faith. It is at the heart of who we are.

Questions:

1. What do you think of the two criticisms of Calvin's belief in the free gift of God's salvation?
2. What drives you to do good works?
3. What pleasure do you take from helping others?