

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 19
CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

In this chapter, Calvin deals with the concept of Christian freedom. This concept is central to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. On the surface, freedom appears to negate Calvin's claims that God is sovereign, meaning that everything that happens, happens exactly as God directs. Calvin wants his readers to understand the real meaning behind Christian freedom. He will discuss it in three parts.

Summary: Part one has to do with freedom from the Law of Moses. He writes, *"The first: that the consciences of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification (their salvation) before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness"* (pg. 834). What Calvin means by this is that Christians are free from worrying about having to be perfect. If they were still living under the law, rather than living under the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, they would have to daily worry about being perfectly obedient to the Law. Otherwise when they broke any part of the Law, they would not be in right relationship with God. At the same time, Calvin does not want Christians to pretend that the Law does not matter. *"Nor can any man rightly infer from this that the law is superfluous for a believer, since it does not stop teaching and exhorting and urging them to do good...the whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness"* (pg. 835). Thus while the Law is intended to guide people to a Godly life, it is not to cause people to doubt their salvation when they are less than perfect. Thus they are free from this worry.

Part two, has to do with people being free to obey God's will. *"The second part, dependent upon the first is that consciences...freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will"* (pg. 836). Calvin believes that when people live under the law, meaning their salvation is dependent upon being perfect *"...they will never be disposed with eager readiness to obey God..."* (pg. 836). Instead, when they are given Christian freedom they become capable of loving God and loving neighbor. This is so because Christian freedom is based on God's love for people being made real in their lives. Calvin puts it this way. *"But, if freed from this severe requirement of the law, or rather from the entire rigor of the law, they hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God, they will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow God's leading"* (pg. 837). In a sense by seeing themselves as children of God, rather than as servants of God, they will respond to the love God offers them by trying to do their best.

Part three, has to do with the things Calvin calls "indifferent". *"The third part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves 'indifferent', we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently"* (pg. 838). What Calvin means by things indifferent include those things which scripture does not demand that people do or not do. Use or not use. This includes things such as eating meat on Friday (something Roman Catholics are not allowed to do), holidays and of vestments (the special clothing worn by clergy). These are all man-made and thus Christians can take or leave them. In addition, this means that people are allowed to use all of God's gifts as long as they use them appropriately. These gifts include laughter, possessions, music, or wine (pg. 841). At the same time, Calvin warns people not to use their freedom as an excuse for causing others to stumble or to ignore their care for the weak. He writes that *"We must at all times seek after love and work toward the edification of our neighbor"* (pg. 845).

Reflection: Freedom, for Calvin then, has nothing to do with our ability to act independently of God. It rather has to do with our relationship with the Law and things indifferent. We are freed from fear and given the ability to allow our consciences to guide our choices in religiously non-essential matters.

Questions:

1. How does Calvin's take on freedom bring you comfort?
2. How does freedom from being perfect help, or hinder, your desire to follow God's will?
3. What are some "indifferent" things that you see in the life of the church?