

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 2 – Part 1

FAITH: ITS DEFINITION SET FORTH, AND ITS PROPERTIES EXPLAINED

In this chapter Calvin begins to more clearly define faith. As we shall see, this matters to Calvin because faith in Jesus Christ is what saves.

Summary: Calvin begins by pointing out that restoring a right relationship to God is only possible through Christ. This is so because no one can live a perfect enough life to “earn” their way into God’s heart. It is only through “...*the appearance of Christ the Redeemer, through whose hand the Heavenly Father...out of his infinite goodness and mercy, willed to help us...*” that we will be able once again to live intimately with God. What we are called on to do then is to, “...*embrace this mercy and rest in it with steadfast hope,*” which is something that can only be done through faith (pg. 543). Thus it is important for us “...*to examine what this faith ought to be like, through which those adopted by God as his children come to possess the Heavenly Kingdom...*” (pg. 543).

Faith, for Calvin, is more than a generic belief in God. It has to have as its object Jesus Christ. This is so because, “*For God would have remained hidden far off if Christ’s splendor had not beamed upon us*” (pg. 544). This means that it is in Christ that we see God fully, or as Calvin puts it, Christ expressed “...*the true image of God*” (pg. 544). In a sense faith needs to know both its destination (God) and its way to it (Christ). And this knowledge is a personal knowledge, not one simply transmitted by the church. “*We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing.*” (pg. 545). Instead salvation is obtained by our own personal recognition of “...*the divine goodness upon which our righteousness rests*” (meaning what Christ has accomplished for us) (pg. 545).

While faith must be based on the knowledge of Christ, Calvin admits that no one can have perfect knowledge and perfect faith. Even so he insists that we should not stop trying to learn, but “...*go forward and, quietly and humbly, to still strive further*” (pg. 546). Calvin even admits that “...*the best teachers should be ready to learn*” (546). This willingness to strive further is what allows “...*the seed of hidden faith-which had been dead, as it were...(to) burst through with renewed vigor*” (pg. 547).

This knowledge of Jesus comes to us, Calvin argues, from “God’s Word” which is another way of saying the New Testament, or the gospel. Though the Old Testament teaches people about God, it is only through the gospel that people see Jesus for who he is and thus see the fullness of God. Calvin reiterates here that it is through the Word of God, the gospel, and not through church traditions that our faith is fully formed.

Even so, knowledge alone is inadequate for the completion of our faith. The knowledge of Jesus as savior must also be made effective within us; it must be made to come alive in us by the Spirit if it is to be of any real use. Calvin writes, “*Therefore our mind must be otherwise illuminated and our heart strengthened, that the Word of God may obtain full faith among us. Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise of Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit*” (pg. 551).

Reflections: Presbyterians have always believed in all members having Biblical knowledge. For this reason, we championed public education and founded Presbyterian colleges and Universities. We understood that faith without a Biblical foundation could easily lead people not only to wrong belief, but wrong action. This is also why our preaching is Biblically focused, so that all of us can grow in knowledge and through that knowledge, in faith.

Questions:

1. How would you define “faith”?
2. Why do you/don’t you think that faith needs specific content?
3. What new insights about God does the New Testament offer us that the Old Testament does not?