

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

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: In the last lesson, on the first part of Chapter 2, Calvin makes it clear that faith has content (knowledge of Jesus Christ), which we receive through the New Testament (Gospel), which is made alive in us through the Holy Spirit. In the second part of this chapter he continues to expand on his understanding of faith in several different ways.

First, Calvin reminds his readers that true faith is more than a mental assent to the reality of God and the work of Jesus. Faith, even while having content, is also a matter of the heart. He quotes the Apostle Paul, *“With the heart a person believes unto righteousness”* (pg. 552), meaning that faith is more than agreeing to a set of beliefs and doctrines. It *“...is more of the heart than of the brain”* (pg. 552).

Second, Calvin believes that all faith is dependent on God. It is a gift of God. This gift of faith, according to Calvin, can be given for a moment or for a lifetime. For many people this is one of the more disturbing parts of Calvin’s doctrine of “election”; meaning that God elects some to have forever faith, some to have temporary faith, and some to have no faith at all. This is Calvin’s way of explaining why some people believe for a lifetime, others believe for a short time and still others never believe at all. At the same time Calvin warns believers that they should be careful to remember that their faith is a gift and so they ought to remain humble *“...lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace the assurance of faith”* (pg. 555).

Third, Calvin speaks of faith as knowledge. Even so he makes clear that the kind of knowledge he refers to is not the *“comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception”* (pg. 559). Instead faith allows us to comprehend *“the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge”* (pg. 559). What this means for Calvin is that faith as acknowledged by us is focused on the assurance of God’s love for us, rather than on information about God. *“From this we conclude that the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension”* (pg. 560).

Fourth, Calvin writes that faith implies certainty. *“For faith is not concerned with a doubtful and changeable opinion, so it is not content with an obscure and confused conception; but requires full and fixed certainty, such as men will have from things experienced and proved...surely, as often as God commends his word to us...he has no other intention than to uproot...doubts from our hearts”* (pg. 560-561). Our part in this certainty is that we are to “embrace” the promises of God’s mercy and love toward us. This embrace according to Calvin is what gives us peace.

Fifth, faith will always win out over doubt. Faith, because it is a gift made real in us by the Spirit, will, even when it is plagued by doubt, never leave us. *“For even if we are distracted by various thoughts (doubts), we are not on that account completely divorced from faith...for the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it”* (pg. 564).

Sixth, faith is a work in progress. *“When even the least drop of faith is instilled in our minds, we begin to contemplate God’s face, peaceful and calm and gracious toward us...then the more we advance...the nearer and thus surer sight of him we obtain”* (pg. 565).

Reflections: People define faith in many ways. I have listened to people say that the only true faith is that which is felt, that which has content, that which leads to action and among many other things. In some ways, they were all right. But they were all wrong when they declared that their experience of faith was the only one. Faith, as Calvin explains, is a relationship with God in Jesus Christ that takes hold of every part of our lives; mind, heart, will and spirit.

Questions:

1. How do you explain why some people believe in God and others do not?
2. How has your faith in God been made real in your life?
3. What comfort do you take in Calvin’s beliefs that faith is both secure and a work in progress?