

October 30, 2005

“John Calvin on the Spiritual Life”  
Reformation Sunday 2005

FCF: Assumption we have nothing to learn from John Calvin

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because of God’s ability to strike straight blows with a crooked stick (and our need to be struck), (magnet) we need to listen and learn from such men as John Calvin.

**TOPIC INTRODUCTION:**

The study of Christian biography – God intends for us to consider the lives of departed saints, peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God. “*But John Calvin?*” many ask. “*He was an egotistical fanatic, hard and humorless, a doctrinal misanthrope, a dictator, the advocate of an arbitrary, uncaring God. What could we learn from him?*” Little, if that be true. Plenty, if it be false.

Even a cursory study shows Calvin’s passion and compassion. A man of his time yet for every season. A man who labored hard and suffered much. A theologian and pastor. An author of commentaries and correspondence. A heart for God and people.

What he wrote we should heed. The themes of his life should find echoes in ours.

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION** – [Book of Common Prayer, p.249](#)

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Calvin’s literary output was tremendous – commentaries on every major book in the Bible, treatises and letters, tracts and sermons (ten every two weeks). Where should one begin? With his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Why? For two reasons – first, because of its comprehensiveness and, second, because of its consistency. It began in 1536 as a “little booklet.” Over the years, it expanded as Calvin’s thought matured such that, by 1559, it was five times its original length – four books and eighty chapters long. But throughout, there is this remarkable consistency – substantial growth without dramatic change. Structured according to the outline of the book of Romans, written in the crucible of trying times, designed to introduce his readers to Christian theology.

But where does one begin in the study of the Institutes? What would suffice as an introduction? For that, we’ll look at excerpts from Book III, entitled, “*The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow.*” Or, to put it more succinctly, “The Life of the Christian.”

In that, there are six headings, each a vital principle of the spiritual life (this outline comes from Mark Shaw’s, 10 Great Ideas from Church History). My approach for this study is simple – to state the principle, let Calvin speak to it (especially from the Institutes), illustrate it from his life, and give a brief suggested application to our own.

**I. DEPEND ON THE SPIRIT**

For Calvin, the most important aspect of the spiritual life is dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit. In that, he reflects the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans 6.

*A) Explanation*

1. Once for all

Calvin draws attention to our relational union with Christ. And this union with Christ is the result of the Spirit’s working in us faith in Christ. Speaking of this work (**III:1:4**):

*He may rightly be called the key that unlocks for us the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven; and his illumination, the keenness of our insight.*

2. Continually

But this union is anything but static. It is continually producing repentance and the working out of this new life in the believer in a twofold fashion. Mortification – the

killing off of the old life through union with Christ's death. Vivification – the creating of new life through union with His resurrection. A lifelong struggle but real effect (III:3:9):

*This restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.*

#### B) Illustration

On this work of the Spirit creating this union with our Lord, Calvin spoke from personal experience ([John Calvin, Selections from His Writings, p.26](#)):

*God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame...Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with (an) intense desire to make progress.*

#### Application:

Well, what do we learn here? A Christian, by definition, is not a self-made man or woman. Nor are we lonely pilgrims sent out and left to muddle through on our own. No, we have been made one with Christ such that He is working in, upon, and through us.

### II. DENY THE SELF

Another component of the spiritual life, according to Calvin, is the denial of self. More than punishing the body or a denial of sweets, it involves a wrestling with the question as to who is in charge – us or God. Here we see echoes of Romans 12.

#### A) Explanation

##### 1. Basis

For Calvin, the basis of self denial was rooted in the fact as to whose we are (III:7:1):

*We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal. O, how much has that man profited who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God.*

##### 2. Expression

And the effect of such a self understanding? Calvin shows how this redirects our plans away from our glory to God's. It changes the ways in which we relate to others – casting aside pride, jealousy, and envy while lifting up love, service, and generosity. And it affects the way we assess our circumstances, encouraging greater contentment as well.

#### B) Illustration

An example of this from Calvin's life was his return to the pastorate in Geneva. His first two years there had been painful. He had been expelled by the City Council. The intervening three years in Strassburg had been like a sabbatical. But now Geneva was calling. Calvin knew he had to go. He wrote ([quote, Legacy, p.131](#)), "Yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord."

#### Application:

Do we not need to hear this? What ails us so profoundly is a dire case of "ego-latry" – the worship and service of self. We know the signs – insistence before God and one another of things being our way, dissatisfaction and discontentment at every turn. And here is the cure – recognizing whose we are and ordering our lives accordingly.

### III. BEAR THE CROSS

Which takes us to the third principle of the spiritual life – heeding the call to bear the cross. There is power in suffering. There is a spiritual war being waged – among forces unseen but also in places unseen. Not just “out there” but “in here” as well.

*A) Explanation*

1. The need

And suffering’s place in this battle? Consider the need, the ravaging disease within – our pride, our complacency. And what measure is taken against this? Suffering (III:8:2):

*He can best restrain this arrogance when he proves to us by experience not only the great incapacity but also the frailty under which we labor. Therefore, he afflicts us either with disgrace or poverty, or bereavement, or disease, or other calamities. Utterly unequal to bearing these, in so far as they touch us, we soon succumb to them. Thus humbled, we learn to call upon his power, which alone makes us stand fast under the weight of afflictions.*

2. The effect

Calvin goes on to describe how the effect of such humbling is like medicine applied by a physician to the patient – gentle or harsh, always measured out for our soul’s health.

*B) Illustration*

Calvin held to these very things in the loss of the first of three children in infancy. Writing a friend, he said ([quote, Legacy, p.132](#)), “*The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children.*” Such trust sustained him in countless trials.

*Application:*

But it should be noted that this was no a “grin-and-bear-it” stoicism as if to say, “*God cannot be resisted. So be patient. If you can’t beat him, endure him.*” No, Calvin knew God as his Father and One who would bring nothing that is not meant for our good. It was an attitude of trust, a posture not of clinched teeth but open hands.

**IV. MEDITATE ON THE ETERNAL**

With the need for self-denial and cross-bearing, Calvin also spoke of meditating on the eternal. That is, we see clearly only when we focus on the vanities of this life with one eye and the glories of the next with the other. Here we hear echoes of Philippians 1.

*A) Explanation*

1. The struggle

The reality, as Calvin points out, is that this life is unpredictable. To trust in it is to build our house on sand. But clear as that may be, this is a struggle for us all (III:9:1):

*If you examine the plans, the efforts, the deeds, of anyone, there you will find nothing else but earth. Now our blockishness arises from the fact that our minds, stunned by the empty dazzlement of riches, power, and honors, become so deadened that they can see no further. The heart also, occupied with avarice, ambition, and lust, is so weighed down that it cannot rise up higher.*

2. The comfort

But for the believer, there is comfort found in the assurance of what awaits and the power breaking even now into the present. Faith feeds on this and contentedly waits with joy.

*B) Illustration*

Calvin himself had to feed on this hope continuously. I alluded to the loss of three children. He also had to endure the loss of his wife, the arduous demands and burdens of the Geneva pastorate, and health that simply worsened with each passing year. With that came opposition from various fronts and threats of death. In fact, there were times he went to bed not knowing if a hostile army might sweep in and take him away.

*Application:*

We need to be reminded of the realities in which we live for we have a tendency to think that this is all that there is. The reality is it's not. And thank God it's not. But there is a continual retuning, resetting, and recalibrating needed of our compasses.

## V. ALL OF LIFE FOR GOD'S GLORY

Not to say that everything of this life is to be disdained. Rather, Calvin then went on to speak of the value of this life and how all of it is to be lived for God's glory.

### A) Explanation

#### 1. Purposes

How do we do that? By recognizing the purposes for the things God has given (**III:10:2**):

*The use of the gifts of God is not unruly when it is limited to the purpose for which God created them for our good...If we consider to what end God created foods, we shall find that he wished not only to provide for our necessities but also for our pleasure and recreation...With herbs, trees and fruits, besides the various uses he gives us of them, it was his will to rejoice our sight by their beauty, and to give us yet another pleasure in their odors.*

Translation – God has given us all things for our use and for our enjoyment as well.

#### 2. Principles

Which is a call then again for contentment, moderation and a sense of accountability as well. For this is, after all, our Father's world and we are to be good stewards.

### B) Illustration

In expressing Calvin's appreciation of beauty, I simply have to share with you these words from his Preface to the New Testament ([quote, Puritan Papers III, p.157](#)):

*Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eye to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odour...Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us apart from their necessary use?*

### Application:

Calvin was no dour utilitarian. He had what Alistair McGrath described as a "critical affirmation of the secular order" which we should share and apply to our work, hobbies, sports, leisure, and the walk on a crisp fall day. There's beauty everywhere.

## VI. PERSIST IN PRAYER

One last component to the spiritual life bears mention – persistence in prayer. Here is some of Calvin's most beautiful and insightful writing (**III:20:2**):

*It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us by the Heavenly Father...To us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.*

### A) Explanation

Profound. Four rules are suggested as to the right posture of our hearts in prayer.

#### 1. Reverence for God

The first is reverence for God, a consideration as to whose presence we are in, the need for concentration on our part and the Spirit's help in this.

#### 2. Sincere need

The second is to come with a sense of our need – the insufficiency of our own resources and a pleading for His assistance. Here we see a counter to cold and habitual praying.

#### 3. A humble and contrite spirit

The third is a humble and contrite spirit, abandoning all self-confidence, self-deserving.

#### 4. Confident faith

Which takes us to the fourth – a confident faith, a bold hope founded upon God's goodness, the assurance of forgiveness, and our standing in Christ.

*B) Illustration*

Calvin saw himself not so much as a theologian but as a pastor. In that, he wrote an untold number of letters – often to prisoners and those destined for martyrdom. These were among the most moving of all. There is an obvious compassion, a joining of heart expressed – and a burden to pray as well (quote, [Puritan Papers III, p.161](#)):

*Although we are not at the moment in a similar condition to yours, we do not cease to strive in prayer, in anxious thought and in compassion as being your members, since it has pleased our heavenly Father in His infinite kindness to unite us in one body under His Son who is our Head.*

*Application:*

Which speaks so powerfully to our tendency to see God as the heavenly grocery clerk – distant with no relation, disinterested with no concern, indebted with nothing to say. No, we come before One who is both King and Father, glorious and good.

**CONCLUSION:**

Calvin's concern in all of this is to help us to see whose we are, the depth of the love of God for His people, and the necessity of a whole life response ([III:6:4](#)):

*For it is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.*

Which brings us to the end – not only of our study but of Calvin's life as well. In his will, dictated just a month before his death, he summarized his life and the gospel he had spent so many of his days proclaiming ([Packer, Shorter Writings IV, p.15](#)):

*I give thanks to God who had mercy on me...He delivered me out of the deep darkness of idolatry in which I was plunged, that he might bring me into the light of his gospel...I have no other defense or refuge for salvation than his free adoption, on which alone my salvation depends. With all my soul I embrace the mercy that he has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for all my offences and faults and blot them from his remembrance.*

To God be the glory for the things He impressed upon His servant so many years ago and the things He continues to impress upon us through him so many years later.

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