

A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ

I. Review of Book II, Chapters 1-5

A. True self-knowledge means recognizing the greatness of God's image in man and the devastation of our Fall into sin, which severely corrupted that image: "...that primal worthiness cannot come to mind without the sorry spectacle of our foulness and dishonor presenting itself by way of contrast..." (2.1.1).

B. This knowledge produces true humility before God because we see that "the soul, plunged into this deadly abyss, is not only burdened with vices, but is utterly devoid of all good" (2.3.2). Hence, we use our free wills only to sin freely.

C. Fortunately, this self-awareness doesn't lead to despair! Rather, "the Lord by his Spirit directs, bends, and governs, our heart and reigns in it as in his own possession" (2.3.10) so that, with a new heart given by God, we freely choose Christ and rejoice in following Him.

I. The Fall and the Law

The whole human race perished in the person of Adam. Consequently, that original excellence and dignity, as already described, would be of no profit to us but would rather redound to our greater shame, until God, who does not recognize as his handiwork men defiled and corrupted by sin, appeared as a Redeemer in the person of his only begotten Son. Since our fall from life unto death, all that knowledge of God the Creator, of which we have discoursed, would be useless, were it not followed up by faith, holding forth God to us as a Father in Christ... For Christ not only speaks to his own age, but comprehends all ages... [U]nder the law Christ was always set before the holy fathers as the end to which they should direct their faith... The law was added about four hundred years after the death of Abraham... it may be gathered that this was not done to lead the chosen people away from Christ; but rather to hold their minds in readiness until his coming; even to kindle desire for him, and to strengthen their expectation, in order that they might not grow faint by too long delay... For what is more vain or absurd than for men to offer a loathsome stench from the fat of cattle in order to reconcile themselves to God? Or to have recourse to the sprinkling of water and blood to cleanse away their filth? In short, the whole cultus of the law, taken literally and not as shadows and figures corresponding to the truth, will be utterly ridiculous... God did not command sacrifices in order to busy his worshippers with earthly exercises. Rather he did so that he might lift their minds higher... (2.6.1-2, 2.7.1)

1. Explain the following statement from the section above: "There would be no Book I if there were no Book II in the Institutes." What do Book I and Book II deal with? How are they related in our lives?
2. Many Christians think of the Law (i.e., all of God commands to Israel on how to live) as an impersonal, mechanical obstacle in the OT before Christ came. How does Calvin seek to correct this? What was the purpose of the Law in the OT, given that Christ "comprehends all ages"?

Hence, Paul's statement appears to be very true: that the Jews were kept under the charge of a "tutor" [Gal 3:24] until the seed should come for whose sake the promise had been given. For, since they had not yet come to know Christ intimately, they were like children whose weakness could not yet bear the full knowledge of heavenly things. (2.7.2)

"Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law."²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed."²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." (Gal 3:21-24)

II. What Changed?: The Law in the New Testament

1. What is the first major way the Law has changed for Christians in light of Christ's work (see Gal 3:13)?

Ceremonial Law – *“The ceremonies are a different matter: they have been abrogated not in effect but only in use...[B]y their termination one may better recognize how useful they were before the coming of Christ, who in abrogating their use has by his death sealed their force and effect.”* (2.7.16)

2. What are some examples whereby Christ “sealed the force and effect” of ceremonial laws by abrogating them? How does this affect our reading/preaching from the OT?

Jewish Civil Law – *“For there are some who deny that any commonwealth is rightly framed which neglects the law of Moses, and is ruled by the common law of nations. How perilous and seditious these views are, let others see: for me it is enough to demonstrate that they are stupid and false.”* (4.20.17, on Civil Government)

Moral Law – *...let us take a succinct view of the function and use of what is called the “moral law.” Now this function and use seems to me to consist of three parts: First, by exhibiting the righteousness of God—in other words, the righteousness which alone is acceptable to God—it admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness, informs, convicts, and finally condemns him... Yet this is not done to cause us to fall down in despair or, completely discouraged, to rush headlong over the brink... For the children of God the knowledge of the law should have another purpose... they come to realize that they stand and are upheld by God's hand alone; that, naked and empty-handed, they flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit.* (2.7.6, 8)

3. What is Calvin's first use of the moral law (what we usually call “2nd use”)? What is its purpose?

The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law... this constrained and forced righteousness is necessary for the public community of men... For where the Spirit of God does not yet rule, lusts sometimes so boil that there is danger lest they plunge the soul bound over to them into forgetfulness and contempt of God. And such would happen if God did not oppose it with this remedy. Therefore, if he does not immediately regenerate those whom he has destined to inherit his Kingdom, until the time of his visitation, he keeps them safe through the works of the law under fear. (2.7.10-11)

4. What are the reasons for the law in the civil sphere? What about for the elect?

The third and principle use, which pertains more closely to the proper use of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns... Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. It is as if some servant, already prepared with all earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and observe his master's ways more carefully in order to conform and accommodate himself to them... Again, because we need not only teaching but also exhortation... The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balking ass, to arouse it to work... We ought not to be frightened away from the law or to shun its instruction merely because it requires a much stricter moral purity than we shall reach while we bear about with us the prison house of the body. For the law is not now acting toward us as a rigorous enforcement officer who is not satisfied unless the requirements are met. But in this perfection to which it exhorts us, the law points out the goal toward which throughout life we are to strive. (2.7.12-13)

5. What is the “principle use” of the law, according to Calvin? How may it be described as both a “lamp” and a “whip”? What is our particular danger as we emphasize this 3rd use? What is Calvin's closing comfort to the Christian who fails to keep the law perfectly?