

A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ

I. *Institutes*, Book III, Ch. 6-10: “The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life”

A. History of the “Golden Booklet” in *Institutes*

1. 1536 edition - No chapter on Christian Life
2. 1539 edition - Final chapter on Christian Life
3. 1559 edition - Divided into 5 chapters and placed after “Repentance”

B. Calvin and Geneva

1. 1536 (July) - William Farel convinces Calvin to pastor in Geneva “not so much by counsel and exhortation as by a dreadful imprecation...” (Calvin)
2. 1538-41 - Protestant opposition force Calvin into exile; Calvin moves to Strausburg, Germany.
3. September 13, 1541 - Farel urges Calvin to return to Geneva.

Why only later (after exile) did Calvin include this immensely practical teaching on the Christian life?

“It is a doctrine [that is, the Christian life] not of the tongue, but of the 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.” (3.6.4)

II. The Inward Christian Life: Self-Denial

The object of regeneration, as we have said, is to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience... Let this therefore be the first step, that a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord... Now in these words we perceive that denial of self has regard partly to men, partly, and chiefly, to God... Unless you give up all thought of self and, so to speak, get out of yourself, you will accomplish nothing here. For how can you perform those works which Paul teaches to be the works of love, unless you renounce yourself, and give yourself wholly to others?... Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love... Say, “He is a stranger”; but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you... Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions... (3.6.1, 3.7.1, 4-6)

1. Calvin called Chapter 7 “The Sum of the Christian Life: The Denial of Ourselves”. What are the two directions in which we should practice self-denial, according to Calvin? Which is primary?
2. What would you say to someone who thought Calvin's form of self-denial meant self-hatred or denigration of self?
3. How does the truth of the following quote (“one of the greatest passages in Christian literature” – David Calhoun) shape how we treat one another?

“We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deed. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as a 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.” (3.7.1)

“Accordingly, the Christian must surely be so disposed and minded that he feels within himself it is with God he has to deal throughout his life.” (3.7.2)

III. The Outward Christian Life: Cross-Bearing

But it behooves the godly mind to climb still higher, to the height to which Christ calls his disciples: that each must bear his own cross. For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil. It is the Heavenly Father's will thus to exercise them so as to put his own children to a definite test. Beginning with Christ, his first-born, he follows this plan with all his children... (3.8.1)

1. What is the typical question asked by many Christians who suffer today? What do you think would have been the question asked by Christians in the New Testament if they didn't suffer?
2. What is the difference between the *fact* of the cross in this life and *bearing* the cross in this life? How is the latter done? How is it a distinctively Christian act?
3. Why is cross-bearing not to be thought of as Stoicism? Are the benefits of cross-bearing automatic?

IV. The Upward Christian Life: Meditation on the Future Life

Whatever kind of tribulation presses upon us, we must ever look to this end: to accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life... [I]f you examine the plans, the efforts, the deeds, of anyone, there you will find nothing else but earth... To counter this evil the Lord instructs his followers in this vanity of the present life by continual proof of its miseries... But let believers accustom themselves to a contempt of the present life that engenders no hatred of it or ingratitude against God. Indeed, this life, however crammed with infinite miseries it may be, is still rightly to be counted among those blessings of God which are not to be spurned... [W]e begin in this life, though various benefits, to taste the sweetness of the divine generosity in order to whet our hope and desire to seek after the full revelation of this. (3.9.1, 3)

1. How was Calvin's call not world-denying, but other-worldly?
2. How then are Christians to view death? What about suicide? What about our responsibility in this world?

"There is almost nothing that we regard more negligently or remember less [than that human life is like a smoke or shadow]... If some corpse is being buried, or we walk among the graves... we, I confess, philosophize brilliantly concerning the vanity of this life. Yet even this we do not do consistently, for often all these things affect us not one bit... Let us, however, consider this settled: that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection." (3.9.2, 5)