



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

We give you thanks, O heavenly Father, who has delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of your Son; grant, we pray, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his presence abiding in us he may raise us to joys eternal; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

--Mozarabic Sacramentary

- **John Calvin on the Lord's Supper and Assurance**
- **John Calvin on the Pastoral Office, Preaching, Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction**

The Need for Assurance of Faith and Calvin's View of Mystical Union

Assurance of Faith

The Bible often defines saving faith in such a way that faith requires a firm trust and assured confidence in God and His promises; faith, in other words, is not faith unless a firm confidence in God is present (NIV Study Bible: a “[f]aith that knows no hesitation in trusting in and following Christ”).

- Cf. Heb. 11:1,6 on the definition and necessity of faith

Compare also

- Rom. 4:21: Abraham's faith consisted in this: that he was “*fully persuaded* that God had power to do what he had promised.”
- Heb. 10:22: “...since we have *confidence* to enter the Most Holy Place, by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in *full assurance of faith*, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...”
- Eph. 3:12: “In him [sc. Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and *confidence*.”

At other times, the Bible appears to treat assurance of faith (the firm conviction that God is who He says He is and can be trusted to do what He has promised) as a sign of spiritual maturity, which believers must seek out and pursue.

- Cf. Col. 4:12: “Ephaphras...is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and *fully assured*.”
- Col. 2:2: “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the *full assurance* of understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

In discussing the issue of trust, it must be recognized that trust is something that is in short supply today and the idea that one could have a certain confidence in another person is becoming much rarer and is often viewed with skepticism.

- Large numbers of people in our contemporary society observe and experience the pain of infidelity and/or divorce. This often leads people to have limited expectations with regard to relationships, i.e. a relationship is good for as long as it lasts, but when it becomes difficult and painful rather than pleasing and fulfilling, the relationship may have run its course and it may be time to move on. There is only so much one can expect out of a relationship and the hope that it might last and the two people involved might live happily ever after is simply the stuff of fairy tales, but regularly disproven by the realities of life.
- It is hard to have much trust in other people when society is based on radical autonomy (“I act because I want to do it and it helps me to meet my needs and/or achieve my personal goals”). Such radical autonomy is an unquestioned ideal in our society and yet we only entrust ourselves to others we feel sure can put our needs above their own, which is clearly impossible for persons committed to radical autonomy.

Trust is a kind of skill that must be developed in the Christian life and helping people develop appropriate patterns of trust is a central aim of pastoral care.

Lack of trust/mistrust in personal relationships is invariably imported into people’s relation to God, with spiritually devastating results; where God cannot be trusted, one must look out for oneself and make one’s own way (typically, by what one does and how one appears to others). To move beyond this and to learn how to trust and how to cultivate the ability to trust is essential for real advance in the Christian life.

Calvin’s Account of the Believer’s Union with Christ and How This is Connected with the Full Assurance of Faith

Calvin rejects the medieval (and counter-Reformation) view that since

- (a) the grace of God lies beyond human perception and therefore
- (b) no one is able to make a certain judgment about who is elect and who is not,

one cannot arrive at any *certainty* concerning one’s own election or final salvation (eliminating doubt); at best one can *hope* (conjecturally, from one’s good works) that one will be saved.

Calvin also wants to reject another view being discussed in the sixteenth century, which grants that faith will inevitably always be hypothetical in character and mixed with doubt, i.e.

- one may be certain of the salvation of those who look in hope to Christ and his merits and place their faith and trust in them (=hope) and yet,
- when one look back at oneself and recognizes one’s own unworthiness, one should and inevitably must hesitate and entertain uncertainty (to avoid presumption and false confidence, which lead to complacency).

The real consequence of this teaching, Calvin thinks is that

- one's conscience is overwhelmed by servile fear that the things promised are not *for them* (that their sins are not forgiven), which undermines faith and
- one's hope in God's mercy therefore withers and their faith wavers and is lost (and their salvation with it).
 - "In short, they so place the conscience between hope and fear that now it moves in one direction and now another. They see hope and fear related in such a way that when the one is up, it completely extinguishes the other, and when it is the other's turn it does the same...there is sure salvation, if you turn back to yourself, there is sure damnation. As if indeed we ought to consider Christ remaining apart from us rather than living within us!"

In conclusion, then, merely hypothetical but uncertain knowledge of one's own identity and position in relation to God must be replaced with a certainty regarding one's identity and position. Since believers are inseparably joined to Christ, the only selves they possess are selves inseparably joined and united to Christ as his most precious possession.

Calvin's view (*Institutes* III.2.24; III.24.4) is that both these positions rest upon a false premise—namely, that Christ is pictured as a rather distant savior, with whom the believer's rather formal and fragile relationship is easily severed.

- According to Calvin, this misunderstands what actually happens when God's purposes are realized in our lives and we experience salvation.
- Salvation in Christ is not merely an external legal transaction, in which one's past debt is remitted by some distant cosmic bureaucrat.
- Instead to be called by God and respond with faith is to be included in Christ and to live in him and he in us (indwelling us by His Spirit).
- Salvation is therefore not simply a matter of accessing Christ's benefits ("Now I have the resources necessary to achieve forgiveness"), but rather an intimate and enduring union of Christ with the soul is formed (not unlike the mystical marriage of the soul to Christ in medieval literature, but with a stronger conception of the corporate Body of Christ).

The question for assurance must begin instead from Christ's mystical union with the believer, by which he indwells and strengthens the believer and is constantly present to the believer in his or her weakness and trials.

- III.2.23: "The reason we hope for salvation is not because he appears to us from afar off but because having engrafted us into his body he makes us participants not only in his benefits but also in himself...This is for sure: We ought neither to separate Christ from ourselves nor ourselves from him, but with both hands to hold fast to that fellowship by which he has bound us to himself."
- III.2.35: "Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of His Spirit, at the same time so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every good."

In this relationship, we are included in Christ in such a way that

- all our sins are born by him (thus our lapses into sin do not alienate us from God and we do not end up back in the same place we were before conversion) and

- we are able to partake of his life, his righteousness, his obedience and his benefits, so that we become increasingly like him (conformed to his image) and more perfectly united to him
- we may be assured that we will be able to persevere to the end since the Christ who indwells us by faith has overcome the world (cf. Rom. 8:38-39).

Consequently there is no reason for our consciences to swing wildly from hope (when looking to Christ) to fear (when looking at ourselves). This is pathological and unhealthy and rests upon a failure properly to know God in Christ or even oneself. When we understand that we are included in Christ and united with him, then we have arrived at an accurate knowledge of ourselves and of God as he effects our salvation through union with Christ, the Spirit sealing upon our hearts the truth of God's benevolence to us, which he promised and freely extends to us in Christ. By this means, God is able to preserve the flagging faith of believers who suffer, doubt and experience adversity, consoling, assuring and strengthening them by affirming the certainty of their real union with Christ (there is no self unaided by grace to turn back to nor is there any ground for anxiety or fear concerning the displeasure and ill-will of some distant deity).

- Cf. the strong words of Calvin in
 - *Institutes* III.7.1 that we belong not to ourselves but to God and in
 - III.2.39 on the need for the testimony of the Spirit, sealing and assuring to us the promises of salvation.
- Cf. also the Heidelberg Catechism's later question (Q. 1): "What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not only to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ..."

Faith and Union with Christ

Faith is more than mental assent and even more than ordinary trust in visible things. To know God, faith must go beyond and rise above ordinary sense perception and mental reflection:

- III.2.14: "Even where the mind has attained [a kind of knowledge of God], it does not comprehend what it feels. But while it is persuaded of what it does not grasp, *by the very certainty of its persuasion* it understands more than if it perceived anything human by its own capacity...what our mind embraces by faith is in every way infinite, and...this kind of knowledge is far more lofty than all understanding."

Although knowledge of spiritual matters cannot involve comprehension (wholly circumscribing and grasping its object), it does involve an assurance or certain persuasion that is even greater than that which attaches to things discerned with the senses:

- III.2.14: "...believers know themselves to be God's children. And obviously they know this. But they are more strengthened by the persuasion of divine truth than instructed by rational proof..."
- III.2.15: faith involves "a solid constancy of persuasion"; it "requires full and fixed certainty" and thus a constant struggle against the unbelief and doubting that continues to assail us throughout this life.

This experience of persuasion is sweet to us, its confidence strengthens our boldness and we are moved to love God in return, so that this persuasion helps us advance from weak and imperfect faith (which God accepts) to stronger faith (which God desires us to have).

- III.2.15: “But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God’s goodness clearly manifested to us...But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves.

For this reason, the apostle derives confidence from faith and then boldness from confidence. For he states, ‘Through Christ we have boldness and access with confidence which is through faith in him’ (Eph. 3:12 Vg.).”

Justification and sanctification are thus like two distinct sides of the same coin; the weaker faith which is sufficient for us to be justified and united with Christ grows over the course of this life to become a stronger, bolder and more active faith.

Faith’s weakness may mean that there are periods when one is distracted by certain powerful thoughts, experiences anxiety or the fear of God or even temporarily loses faith and yet these are not experiences which define faith or for which believers must settle (as if no higher possibilities existed in the normal Christian life).

- III.2.21: “the root of faith can never be torn from the godly breast, but clings so fast to the inmost parts that, however faith seems to be shaken or to bend this way or that, its light is never so extinguished or snuffed out that it does not at least lurk as it were beneath the ashes. And this example shows that the Word, which is an incorruptible seed brings forth fruit like itself, whose fertility never wholly dries up and dies. “
- III.2.18: because of what faith is by its very nature, it “ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it,” especially the claim of unbelief that God is “against us and hostile to us” and “we should not hope for any help from him, and should fear him as if he were our deadly enemy.”

Lord’s Supper

The Weakness of Our Faith as the Reason for the Institution of the Supper

To aid our weak faith, which looks to the world of sense for confirmation, Christ, through his Spirit, offers himself to his followers through a tangible sign

- “God gives no more by visible signs than by His Word, but gives in a different manner, because our weakness stands in need of a variety of helps” (*Clear Instruction in Calvin’s Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid, p. 281)
- III.2.31: “For unless the power of God, by which he can do all things, confronts our eyes, our ears will barely receive the Word or not esteem it at its true value.”

Christ in his humanity has done all that was necessary for our salvation and we must partake of him and of his life to receive the benefits won by his death. It is the Word (annexed to the elements), coming in the power of the Spirit, which draws us into union with Christ and makes it possible for us to receive his benefits.

- IV.17.2: “Godly souls can gather great assurance and delight from this sacrament. In it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ so that whatever is his may be called ours. Consequently, we may dare assure ourselves that eternal life—of which he (sc. Christ) is the heart—is ours, that the kingdom of heaven

into which he has already entered can be no more shut off from us than for him, and that we cannot be condemned for our sins from whose guilt he has absolved us since he willed to them upon himself as if they were his own.”

The Decisive Role of the Holy Spirit in Uniting the Believer with Christ and His Benefits In and Through the Lord's Supper

To encounter Christ in his humanity after his ascension, we must be drawn up to commune with him by the power of the Spirit, which extends the benefits of Christ's humanity to persons distant in respect of place, so that we are able to feel Christ living within us.

- “Although Christ is distant from us in respect of place, he is yet present by the boundless energy of His Spirit, so that his flesh can give us life” (*Clear Explanation in Calvin's Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid, p. 289)

(Cf. the way the Spirit acts in and through created realities in preaching to confirm and strengthen our faith.) By the secret power of the Spirit, the Lord's Supper signifies and seals to us Christ's death offered for our life and our confession of Christ and consecration of ourselves to him (whose members we are), since our life lies in communion with Christ and this communion (granted by the Spirit and received by faith) gives life to our souls, so that our faith is confirmed and we are strengthened to live in greater purity of life. See IV.17.2.

The Union with Christ's Body (Which Is Experienced in the Supper As Well As Signified By It) As a Means of Grace

All crudely materialistic accounts of Christ's real presence ought to be rejected, e.g. impanation (Christ enclosed within the element), but the Lord's Supper is also not to be reduced to a mental imagination of spiritual realities.

- “The flesh of Christ gives life, not only because we once obtained salvation by it, but because now, while we are made one with Christ by a sacred union, the same flesh breathes life into us...” (*Corpus Ref.* 9:30f.)
- “Such is the union between us and Christ, who in some sort makes us partakers of his substance. ‘We are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh,’ Gen. 2:23, not because of like ourselves he has a human nature, but because, by the power of His Spirit, he makes us a part of his body, so that from him we derive our life” (*Comm. on Eph.* 5:31)

The Spirit sent down to us by Christ is the bond of communion that draws our hearts and minds away from our immediate circumstances and up to heaven to commune with Christ in his humanity and also unites us with the whole Body of Christ.

- “God has given us the Lord's Supper as a reminder that our souls have no other pasture than Jesus Christ, and as a means that leads us into communion with him. It is a sign by which, under bread and wine, he represents the true spiritual communion that we have in Christ's body and blood. But it is not an empty or unmeaning sign that is held out to us, for those who receive this promise by faith are actually made partakers of his flesh and blood. The true eating of the flesh of Christ, therefore, is not only pointed out by the sign, but is likewise exhibited in reality

But there are three mistakes against which we must guard: Firstly, not to confuse the spiritual blessing with the sign; secondly, not to seek Christ on earth or under earthly elements; thirdly, not to imagine any other kind of eating than that which draws us into the life of Christ by the secret power of the Holy Spirit, and which we obtain by faith alone. God has given us this sacrament in addition to the Word, to assist our frailty, to fortify our faith, to augment our charity and to further us in all sanctity of life” (*Commentary on Matthew 26:26*)

Preparation for Communion: Since, as Paul says, we should examine ourselves and eat and drink in such a way that we discern the Lord’s body, there is a need for preparation prior to receiving communion

- faith and contrition/repentance is required;
- a feeling of unworthiness not a reason to abstain from communion, nor is the presence of sinners or persons of weak at communion

“We shall benefit very much from the Sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved upon our minds, that none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time injuring, despising and abusing Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren; that we ought to take the same care of our brethren’s bodies as we take of our own, for they are members of our body...For what sharper goad could there be to arouse mutual love among us than when Christ, giving himself to us, not only invites us by his own example to pledge and give ourselves to one another, but inasmuch as he makes himself common to all, also makes all of us one in himself” (*Inst. 4.17.38*).