The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.4

Opening Comments

Our reading this week comes from the *Institutes* of John Calvin, published in 1559. Calvin was born in 1509, in Noyon, France, and attained a degree in Law from the University of Bourges. He also studied Greek, Latin and Hebrew in the College of Royal Lecturers in Paris, and planned to build his career by becoming one of the learned members of European society, recovering and commenting on Greek and Latin literature, following the example of Desiderius Erasmus. But in the early 1530's, Calvin experienced what he called "a sudden conversion to teachableness," most likely due to reading Martin Luther, and as a result he dedicated the rest of his life to restoring access to Scripture for the unlearned Christians of his day. He hoped in this way to restore the Church which he claimed was brought to ruin by the Roman Church. His commitment to reform led him to flee France for Geneva, where he spent the rest of his life working for the restoration of the Church.

The *Institutes of the Christian Religion* became a central part of that project, along with commentaries on nearly every book of Scripture. Calvin sought to teach doctrine that would build up the faith and piety of Christians, while also answering the objections of others to this teaching. We see both objectives in today's reading, for Calvin seeks to build up the hope of his readers by illuminating the central importance of meditating on the resurrection, while also answering the objections of those who deny or misunderstand the nature of the resurrection, and its relationship to the immortality of the soul. In fact, one reason I chose Calvin for this seminar is that he is a clear example of a Christian theologian who combines the immortality of the soul with the resurrection of the body in an attempt to understand life after death.

As we heard in the lectio divina this evening, Calvin describes God as the author and fountain of every good thing, as revealed both in creation and in redemption. We can still experience the goodness of God in creation even after the fall into sin, but the self-revelation of God in creation is not able to unite us to God given the introduction of sin and death by Adam. God sent Christ to take upon himself our sin and death, and to give us his righteousness and immortality, so that we might be eternally united to God,

which is our blessedness. Calvin describes the work of Christ as a wonderful exchange:

> Hence it follows, that we can confidently assure ourselves, that eternal life, of which he himself is the heir, is ours, and that the kingdom of heaven, into which he has entered, can no more be taken from us than from him; on the other hand, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from the guilt of which he absolves us, seeing he has been pleased that these should be imputed to himself as if they were his own. This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness. Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.

According to Calvin, faith brings about our union with Christ, so that we participate in all of the good things God has freely bestowed on us in Christ, including eternal life and immortality. However, as is clear from our reading, the present experience of believers seems to contradict the faith that our mortality has been taken away from us by Christ, and eternal life freely bestowed on us in Christ. As Calvin says when speaking of Abraham in his *Commentary on Romans*:

> All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.

This brings us to the theme of tonight's reading, which focuses on the hope of resurrection and eternal life. On the one hand, the faithful are assured that they belong to Christ and Christ belongs inseparably to them, so that the resurrection of Christ is the pledge of their own resurrection. "I have deferred the brief consideration to be given of it to this place, that my readers may learn, when they have received Christ, the author of perfect salvation, to rise higher, and know that he is clothed with heavenly

immortality and glory in order that the whole body may be rendered conformable to the Head." On the other hand, nothing in our experience seems to confirm our union with Christ, and this contradiction threatens to undermine our hope completely. "Hence the reason why faith is so rare in the world; nothing being more difficult for our sluggishness than to surmount innumerable obstacles in striving for the prize of our high calling. To the immense load of miseries which almost overwhelm us, are added the jeers of profane men, who assail us for our simplicity, when spontaneously renouncing the allurements of the present life we seem, in seeking a happiness which lies hid from us, to catch at a fleeting shadow." This is especially true for believers, for as we saw in Paul, we can only hope to be raised with Christ if we suffer and die with Christ. "Paul justly contends, that if Christ rise not the whole gospel is delusive and vain (1 Cor. 15:13-17); for our condition would be more miserable than that of other mortals, because we are exposed to much hatred and insult, and incur danger every hour; nay, are like sheep destined for slaughter." This has even led members of the Church to claim that everything ends in death, thereby erasing any hope in resurrection and eternal life: "as if they actually resolved to banish all remembrance of the resurrection, they have called death the end of all things, the extinction of man. For Solomon certainly expresses the commonly received opinion when he says 'A living dog is better than a dead lion,' (Eccl. 9:4). In all ages a brutish stupor has prevailed, and, accordingly, it has made its way into the very Church; for the Sadducees had the hardihood openly to profess that there was no resurrection, nay, that the soul was mortal." This was also the case in Calvin's own day, as he observes in another commentary. "From this we see how many people are Christians in name only, since the greater part, on hearing mention made of death, are not merely alarmed, but are rendered almost lifeless through fear, as though they had never heard a single word respecting Christ." Like Athanasius, Calvin claims that genuine Christian faith makes it possible for believers to confront the reality of their own death directly without losing their hope of life after death. "In the meantime, believers do not cease to regard death with horror, but when they turn their eyes to that life which follows death, they easily overcome all dread by means of that consolation."

Calvin presents his readers with two primary strategies by which they might overcome their dread of death with the hope for life. The first is to keep in mind that what God did in Christ by raising him from the dead was not at all for Christ alone, but is rather the pledge that God will do the same for all who belong to Christ. "It is not lawful, it is not even possible, to separate him from us, without dividing him. Hence Paul's argument, 'If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen,' (1 Cor. 15:13);

for he assumes it as an acknowledged principle, that when Christ was subjected to death, and by rising gained a victory over death, it was not on his own account, but in the Head was begun what must necessarily be fulfilled in all the members, according to the degree and order of each." The same thing is revealed in the pledge or down payment that the Spirit makes in each one who receives it. "For he elsewhere says that God did not raise up his Son from death to give an isolated specimen of his mighty power, but that the Spirit exerts the same efficacy in regard to them that believe; and accordingly he says, that the Spirit when he dwells in us is life, because the end for which he was given is to quicken our mortal body." This is why Calvin continuously holds before us the example of Saint Paul, who refused to let anything separate him from Christ, even though Christ was in heaven and he was on earth, subject to suffering and death. As Paul says, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

The other strategy Calvin provides is to remind believers that their hope for redemption, and for freedom from corruption and death, is but a small part of the hope of the whole cosmos for the same future, following the testimony of the apostle Paul: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be set free from enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21). Calvin uses this passage from Paul in tonight's reading to build up the hope of the faithful, by linking their hope to the hope of all creation: "And that [believers] may not faint in their course, he associates all the other creatures with them. As shapeless ruins are everywhere seen, he says that all things in heaven and earth struggle for renovation. For since Adam by his fall destroyed the proper order of nature, the creatures groan under the servitude to which they have been subjected through his sin; not that they are at all endued with sense, but that they naturally long for the state of perfection from which they have fallen**.**" In his commentary on this passage, Calvin gives a poetic description of the hope that flows through all creation:

> He sets before us an example of obedience in all created things, and adds, that it springs from hope; for hence comes the alacrity of the sun and moon, and of all the stars in their constant

> courses, hence is the sedulity of the earth's obedience in bringing forth fruits, hence is the unwearied motion of the air, hence is the prompt tendency to flow in water. God has given to everything its charge; and he has not only by a distinct order commanded what he would to be done, but also implanted inwardly the hope of renovation.

Our hope to be free from suffering, decay, and death is not unique to human beings. The whole of creation longs for freedom from death and corruption, and the whole of creation is sustained by the hope that God has implanted in the universe. When we groan over the delay in our redemption, we join with the groaning of all of creation, and so we should not lose hope.

But what of the delay between the resurrection of Christ and our own resurrection? Calvin knew that it had already been 1500 years since Christ was raised, and in the meantime countless believers have died and been buried. If our hope is in the resurrection when Christ returns, then what becomes of us when we die? There were Christian theologians in Calvin's day who based their expectation on the key text from Daniel 12:2: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt." On the basis of this text, they taught that the soul sleeps with the body until the day when the dead are raised with Christ, thinking that Paul also teaches this position in his letter to the Thessalonians: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). It is important to note that one of the theologians who taught the sleep of the soul was Martin Luther. Calvin strongly disagrees with this teaching, and counters it by appealing to his understanding of the immortality of the soul, which alone can explain how Paul can depart to be with Christ when he dies, and how the thief on the cross can be with Christ in paradise when he dies. "Did not the soul survive the body, how could it be present with the Lord on being separated from the body?" According to Calvin, when believers die, their souls experience blessed rest in the presence of God, as they await the time of resurrection, when they will be fully united with God in eternal life. "Still, since Scripture uniformly enjoins us to look with expectation to the advent of Christ, and delays the crown of glory till that period, let us be contented with the limits divinely prescribed to us—viz. that the souls of the righteous, after their warfare is ended, obtain blessed rest where in joy they wait for the fruition of promised glory, and that thus the final result is suspended till Christ the Redeemer appear." He makes the same observation when speaking of the thief joining Christ in paradise. "We ought not to enter into

curious and subtle arguments about the place of paradise. Let us rest satisfied with knowing that those who are engrafted by faith into the body of Christ are partakers of that life, and thus enjoy after death a blessed and joyful rest, until the perfect glory of the heavenly life is fully manifested by the coming of Christ."