

## Dear Friends of the Foundation:

John Calvin articulated an important understanding of the nature and reality of Christian faith:

**“Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”**

John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page, 3.2.7 (1:551), emphasis added.

Each phrase of this definition contributes something important. Calvin defines faith as “a firm and certain knowledge.” That ran against the commonly accepted understanding of faith at the time, and it continues to inform our Presbyterian understanding of faith in a way that challenges other understandings now. Calvin insists again and again that faith is knowledge. It is something that we know, and it is something that we know surely and with great confidence. This represented a major change from the medieval catholic church, which had taught that faith was not a matter of knowing but a matter of believing what that church said to believe. Calvin rejected this as nonsense. He insisted instead that faith is a matter of what we can know, not merely of what we believe. Still today, there are people who portray faith as a matter of believing, and feeling good about, that which we cannot know. But what comfort would that be? How surely could we believe, and therefore how comforted could we be by, that which we do not and cannot know?

Not only is faith knowledge, but also it is **“a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.”** The content of our knowledge is that God is good toward us. It is not only knowledge that God is. It is additionally and specifically knowledge that God wills our good. Such knowledge is, in fact, salvation. Thus we see again the importance of knowing in contrast to not knowing, or ignorance. To be ignorant of God’s grace and mercy would be to be hopelessly lost. To know God’s grace and mercy is to be saved. So it is that in the Presbyterian Church we continue to emphasize the importance of the life of the mind precisely as a major component of Christian life and faithfulness; we continue to emphasize the importance of education and reading; we continue to emphasize the importance of studying and learning the content of the Scriptures.

How do we know of God’s benevolence? Faith is **“a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ.”** The knowledge of God’s benevolence is not a general knowledge. It is not available by looking at the world. It is not available by searching one’s heart. The knowledge of God’s benevolence is a very specific knowledge, and its foundation is “the truth of the freely given promise in Christ.” We know that God wills our good because, and only because, Jesus Christ tells us so. We know

that God wills our good because, and only because, Jesus Christ paid the price for our sin in his death on the cross and promised to us in his place the good that he deserved. This is not ignorance. This is not a warm feeling. This is very specific and well grounded knowledge of God's good will for us.

There is more. Faith is **“a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”** Again, this is not generally available knowledge, and it is not even knowledge available to pious seekers. This knowledge depends upon divine revelation to our minds and divine sealing upon our hearts. That is to say, we are saved by grace alone. If we were smart enough or good enough to attain this knowledge ourselves, we would not need grace and we would not need to be saved. But we are not smart enough, and we are not good enough. We need help, and that help is grace. What that grace, that act of God in the Holy Spirit, does in us is to give to us the gift of faith, knowing in our minds that God wills our good and then, because and only because we know it, believing also with all our hearts that God wills our good. Such knowledge is the faith through which alone we are saved.

Grace and Peace,

Jim

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, *Executive Director*

**Foundation for Reformed Theology**

4103 Monument Avenue

Richmond, Virginia 23230

(804) 678-8352

[www.foundationrt.org](http://www.foundationrt.org)

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