

“A major step forward.” —J. I. Packer



THEOLOGICAL
GUIDE TO
CALVIN'S
INSTITUTES

ESSAYS AND ANALYSIS



The Calvin 500 Series

EDITED BY

DAVID W. HALL *and* PETER A. LILLBACK





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P U B L I S H I N G

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Historiam esse vitae magistram, vere dixerunt ethnicis

—Calvin on Romans 4:23–24

The editors wish to echo the author that all the following authors seek to honor by acknowledging not only that the world of unbelief occasionally joins Calvin in referring to history as the teacher of life (*vitae magistram*) but also that in our own lives, those who have preceded us have been marvelous teachers of life, precisely because they valued history so highly. For centuries, little-known (but faithful) professors have sought to enlighten young minds with the knowledge that John Calvin proffered. Our lives have been enriched by such, and we are profoundly grateful for those who taught us Calvin's *Institutes* and an appreciation for Calvin's insights. We wish to thank and dedicate this volume to all those who have been our seminary professors and life instructors, especially to those below who kindly and wisely inculcated a love for Calvin in us during our formative years:

Dr. William S. Barker
Dr. Robert L. Reymond
Dr. David C. Jones
Dr. Joseph H. Hall
Dr. David C. Calhoun
Dr. D. Clair Davis
Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson
Dr. S. Lewis Johnson
Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr.

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FOREWORD

Calvin's *Institutes* (5th edition, 1559) is one of the wonders of the literary world—the world, that is, of writers and writing, of digesting and arranging heaps of diverse materials, of skillful proportioning and gripping presentation; the world, as Dorothy L. Sayers described it in *The Mind of the Maker*, of the Idea, the Word, and the Power. In the days before blurbs and dust jackets, authors had to state on the title page whatever they wanted readers and bookshop browsers to be aware of regarding their book's contents. This explains why, with what might strike us as self-promoting grandiloquence, Calvin titled the first edition (1536) *Basic instruction (institutio) in the Christian religion, embracing just about (fere) the whole sum of godliness (summa pietatis), and all that needs to be known in the doctrine of salvation; a work very well worth reading by everyone zealous for godliness*; and why in 1539 this became *Basic instruction in the Christian religion, now at last truly answering to its description (nunc vere demum suo titulo respondens)*; and why the 1559 edition announced itself as *Basic instruction in the Christian religion, freshly set out in four books, and divided into chapters according to the fittest method, and so greatly enlarged that it can almost be regarded as a new work*. Plainly, Calvin was at last content with what he had done, and the verdict of history is that he was entitled to be. Simply, as grand-scale exposition of a very large body of integrated thought, the *Institutio* is truly a marvel.

Through its five editions, Calvin's *summa pietatis* grew to five times its original length and from six to eighty chapters, divided into four books. Each of the third and fourth books matches for length the first two put together. It began as a catechetical account of foundational Protestant Christianity, loosely modeled on Luther's Smaller Catechism, covering in sequence the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the gospel sacraments

and the five rites incorrectly so called, and the life of freedom under the Word of God in church and state; all with an apologetic cast, in hope of gaining respect and acceptance from the King of France, to whom Calvin addressed a courteous dedicatory letter. New material mutated the second edition (1539) into a sort of *summa theologiae*, a theological student's preparation and *vade mecum* for Bible study, and this trebled the book's length. In the third and fourth editions the amplifying process continued, and by 1559 the *Institutio* was twice as long again as in 1539. It was now a full-scale declaration of biblical Christianity as Calvin saw it—who and what God is, and what he was, is, and will be doing in and for the human race, according to his Word. The titles of the four books reflect the four-part division of the Creed and, behind this, the order of things in Paul's letter to the Romans. They run thus: "of the knowledge of God in his works and qualities . . . as Creator and sovereign Governor of the world"; "of the knowledge of God the Redeemer as he has shown himself in Jesus Christ"; "of the manner of participating in the grace of Jesus Christ"; and "of the external means of aids which God uses to draw us to Jesus Christ his Son and to keep us in him" (church, sacraments, and civil order, all viewed as a means of grace).

The readability of the *Institutio*, considering its size, is remarkable. Calvin's pacing is steady and urgent throughout. Just about every sentence contains concentrated thought expressed in elegant, fast-moving, colorful, punchy Latin rhetoric. (No English translation fully matches Calvin's Latin; that of the Elizabethan, Thomas Norton, perhaps gets closest; Beveridge gives us Calvin's feistiness but not always his precision; Battles gives us the precision but not always the punchiness, and fleetness of foot; Allen is smooth and clear, but low-key.) Calvin's combative streak and lawyer's training impelled him to argue his opponents under the table, as we might put it, and sixteenth-century controversial manners, or lack of them, led him to bad-mouth his opponents personally as he argued against their ideas, and the 1559 *Institutio* is disfigured by some over-arguing and satirical brutalities. All in all, however, the book remains a literary masterpiece, a triumph of the didactic writer's art, and when read seriously it makes a very winning impact on the mind and heart, even today.

Nor is that all.

The *Institutio* is also one of the wonders of the spiritual world—the world of doxology and devotion, of discipleship and discipline, of Word-through-Spirit illumination and transformation of individuals, of the Christ-centered mind and the Christ-honoring heart. Shaping all its elaborate doctrinal discussions, with their rigorous biblicism, their strong assertions of divine sovereignty, and their sharply focused trinitarianism, is a persistent orientation to the conscience, a contagious awareness that we do and must live our lives *coram Deo*, in the presence and sight of the searcher of hearts, and a drumbeat insistence that sound belief must express itself in *pietas*, faithful—that is, faith-full—obedience to, and worship of, the Father and the Son through the Spirit. Though the *Institutio* became more than a catechism in that it reached beyond the basics of the discipling process, it nowhere became less than a catechism by losing its discipling focus as the permanent bottom line. The exposition of Jesus Christ as set forth in the Creed, and of the Christian life, of the Ten Commandments, and of praying the Lord's Prayer, stands out in the ongoing flow as (to change the image) jewels in the crown

Catechizing, a ministry neglected and needing to be recovered in the modern church, is the work of systematically teaching children and adults the truths that Christians live by, and the way of actually living by them. The catechizing process may take different forms, from the familiar question-and-answer, repeat-after-me style of children's catechisms, to the lecture-for-discussion method of such as Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century and Nicky Gumbel in the Alpha course of today. Real, intelligent commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord, and God, to the fellowship of the church as one's proper milieu for life, and to self-identification as pilgrims through a world that is not our home to a heaven that is, must ever be catechizing's direct goal. This practical discipling purpose runs all through the *Institutio*. I doubt there is any other treatise of comparable length of which that can be said. Still today, one simply cannot read it receptively without being searched, humbled, and challenged regarding one's sincerity and progress (Calvin's favorite word), or lack of it, in one's personal Christian life.

And there is yet more to be said.

Calvin's *Institutio* is one of the wonders of the theological world, too—that is, the world of truth, faithfulness, and coherence in the mind regarding God; of combat, regrettable but inescapable, with intellectual insufficiency and error in believers and unbelievers alike; and of vision, valuation, and vindication of God as he presents himself through his Word to our fallen and disordered minds. Refusing to affirm anything that does not echo explicit biblical teaching, and refusing too to separate things God has joined, Calvin spells out Christ-centered faith and life with a sure touch. Justification by faith, “the mainstay for upholding religion” (3.11.1), is central, both spatially and theologically, occupying chapters 11–18 of book 3. What precedes it is what must first be known before we can grasp it—that God is triune, holy, and just yet good and gracious, Lord of history and disposer of all things (1.10–18); that godliness means humble love, gratitude, reverence, submission, and dependence God-ward (1.2); that we humans are by nature guilty, blind, and helpless in sin (2.1–5); that both Testaments witness to Jesus Christ, the divine-human Mediator, whose death gained salvation for us (2.6–17); what the law requires (2.8); what faith is (3.2); how God gives faith (3.1); how faith begets repentance (3.3–5); and Christian living (3.6–10). What follows justification is, in effect, a program for our spiritual health as justified sinners. We must know that our freedom from the law is for obedience to it (3.19); that we cannot go on without prayer (3.20); that God's election guarantees our final salvation (3.21–24, the “predestination chapters”); that we have a sure hope of resurrection in glory (3.25); that we must wait on the ministry of Word and sacrament in the church for our soul's growth (4.1–19); and that we must be good citizens, since civil government exists to protect the church (4.20). Such is personal Christianity, with justification as the framing notion, as Calvin's giant catechism—overgrown, perhaps, but a catechism still—sets it forth.

For Calvin, the angle of these pastoral presentations was just as important as their substance. Doxological theocentrism shaped everything. His compassionate concern that everyone should know God's grace was rooted in a deeper desire, namely that everyone should glorify God by a life of adoring worship for the wonder of his work in creation,

providence, and salvation, fully recognizing the realities that the Reformational slogans *sola Scriptura*, *solo Christo*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *soli Deo gloria*, were put in place to guard. Knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer, holy, just, wise, and good, comes to us by Scripture *alone*, not by our own independent insight or guesswork. The blessings of redemption—reconciliation with God, the gift of righteousness and sonship, regeneration, glory—come to us by Christ *alone*, not by any fancied personal merit or any priestly mediation on the part of the church. Christ and his gifts are received by faith *alone*, not earned by effort. That very faith is given to us and sustained in us by grace *alone*, so that our own contribution to our salvation is precisely nil; all the glory for it must go to God *alone*, and none be diverted to us. We are simply the sinners whose need of salvation is met by the marvelous mercy of him who “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32 ESV). The 1559 *Institutio* is, as we have seen, Calvin’s swan song, in which he speaks his last word on everything, including the errors he constantly battled—anti-trinitarianism, illuminism, Pelagianism, anti-nomianism, autosoterism, sacerdotalism; wrong ideas about justification, ecclesiastical authority, the eucharist, and so on—and the roughness of his polemic as he works over these deviant views for what he expects to be the last time is an index of the intensity of his sense that the mistakes rob God of the praise that is his due.

Great theology, like the Bible in which all great theology is soaked, is essentially transhistorical and transcultural, and interprets us, joltingly sometimes, as we seek to interpret it. The 1559 *Institutio* is great theology, and it is uncanny how often, as we read and re-read it, we come across passages that seem to speak directly across the centuries to our own hearts and our own present-day theological debates. You never seem to get to the book’s bottom; it keeps opening up as a veritable treasure trove of biblical wisdom on all the main themes of the Christian faith. Do you, I wonder, know what I am talking about? Dig into the *Institutio*, and you soon will.

This book celebrates the five hundredth anniversary of John Calvin’s birth and is the work of a team of scholars to whom different sections of the *Institutio* were parceled out. Full advantage is taken of the current cottage

Foreword

industry of Calvin studies, which has achieved already notable insights in many areas. The essays vary in technical level, but are all strong and clear for the wayfaring man, and some are outstanding. They add up to a very valuable volume, which I commend with enthusiasm. For making Calvin known today as well as once he was, and in every age deserves to be, this really is a major step forward. *Soli Deo gloria!*

J. I. PACKER
Board of Governors' Professor of Theology,
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PREFACE

Over the centuries various ways have been found to gather some of the finest authorities for conversations. Whether one thinks of the ancient Athenian agora where citizen philosophers held forth, or an Arthurian round table which was an early form of a polis, or Luther's table talks with disciples in German common houses, or a French salon heady with eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals, or today's blog, which provides instant access for an international community, we often find that excellent ideas are further sharpened with infusions of commentary from others. This volume is best viewed as a conversation among informed friends.

The common topic is textual matter from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The common commitment is to honor the text and to, perhaps, elucidate the topic in some fashion. The scholarship contained is uncommon.

The editors are quite happy to present to the reading public this collection of commentaries on Calvin's *Institutes*. We think that John Calvin would certainly approve of the hearty discussion, amplification, and reflection upon his work such as we offer herein. He certainly recognized that his first edition (1536) could be improved, for he revised this magnum opus in 1539, 1545, 1554, and 1559.

One can observe how widely his work spread in a relatively short time. By 1578, Oxford undergraduates were required to read Calvin's *Institutes* and his Catechism. Moreover, if English sermons in the next (seventeenth) century were still referencing Calvin's *Institutes* as a vital source for opposing governmental abuse, American colonial sermons conveyed his sentiments even more. "Probably no other theological work," wrote Herbert Foster, "was so widely read and so influential from the

Reformation to the American Revolution. . . . In England [it] was considered 'the best and perfectest system of divinity' by both Anglican and Puritan until [Archbishop William] Laud's supremacy in the 1630s."¹ "Most colonial libraries seem to contain some work by Calvin"; indeed, "scarcely a colonial list of books from New Hampshire to South Carolina appears to lack books written by Calvinists."²

For centuries, this robust theological classic has remained must-reading for ministerial students, informed Christians, and various academic disciplines. The fact that this work is still available in multiple editions via the leading online book service is a further tribute to its value.

Prior to this present work, other individuals have set forth their own commentaries or summaries of Calvin's *Institutes*. What this volume offers is a chorale with many voices; we believe that the chorale is superior to a solo.

Expert commentators were chosen for this volume with three criteria in mind: (1) their sympathetic readings of Calvin's work, although not uncritically so; (2) their teaching of this material for a considerable span of time, normally in seminaries or universities; and (3) their willingness to meet a rigid publication schedule to have this material form part of the commemorative corpus for the Calvin Quincentenary in 2009.

The editors wish to thank each of our overextended contributors who prioritized this work. The end product reflects the years of preparation and contemplation of these topics that each of them brings to this volume. We wish to thank them, their families, and their

1. Robert M. Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970), 37. See also the *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929), 116.

2. Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 37. Other historians argue that the Puritanism of New England was "patterned after the Westminster Catechism and embodied the type of Calvinistic thought current in all of New England at that time." See Peter De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology, 1620–1847* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 85. Foster, *Papers*, 79, lists numerous Americans who owned copies of Calvin's *Institutes*. Patricia Bonomi has also firmly established that the majority of seventeenth-century Americans followed "some form of Puritan Calvinism, which itself was divided into a number of factions." See Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

institutions for allowing them to lend a hand to a once-in-a-lifetime festschrift, one that we cheerfully albeit posthumously offer to the Protestant Reformer who offered so many tributes to the theological exemplars who shaped his life. We do so with the prayer that five hundred years from now, perhaps an even larger audience will be working similarly.

DAVID W. HALL

PETER A. LILLBACK

I

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE *INSTITUTES* AS A WORK IN THEOLOGY

WILLIAM S. BARKER



John Calvin was twenty-six years old when he drafted the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was published in the following year, 1536. His fifth and final Latin edition, published in 1559 (there were also several French editions published in his own lifetime), was almost five times as long, yet it still bore his “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France” even though that monarch had died in 1547. Calvin made a few modifications to this Preface in his editions of 1539 and 1543, but he evidently believed that his address to King Francis provided an appropriate introduction to his work, which he intended both as a defense of the Protestant Reformation movement, begun by Martin Luther less than two decades before Calvin’s first edition, and as an instruction to the followers of the Reformers in the basic tenets of the Christian faith,

so that they could study the Bible with greater facility. The Latin word *institutio*, sometimes in the plural form *institutiones*, was used frequently in sixteenth-century titles, with the meaning of “instruction” or “education.” Hence Calvin’s title means instruction in the Christian religion.

To understand the unique place of this influential work in the history of theology we must first inquire as to the role of Francis I, then grasp the context of persecution, next see the Reformers’ relation to Scripture and the early church, also their relation to the radical Anabaptist wing of the Reformation, and then see more fully the purpose of the *Institutes*.

Who Was Francis I (1515–47)?

A quintessential Renaissance monarch, Francis was twenty-one when he became king of France. Over six feet tall, he was a promoter of scholarship and loved magnificent clothing. Almost exactly contemporary with Henry VIII of England (1509–1547), Francis won a wrestling match with Henry in June of 1520 on the “Field of the Cloth of Gold” outside Calais to settle some of the disputes between their two realms. Not unlike Henry, Francis was a philanderer. In May 1517 he and his courtiers rode incognito through the streets of Paris at night, visiting houses of ill-repute. By 1522 his court comprised 540 officials, more than twice that of his predecessor, Louis XI, in 1480. During Francis’s reign the population of France grew to be more than double that of Spain and five times that of England. The Concordat of Boulogne with Pope Leo X in 1516 gave the French church the freedom to nominate its own bishops, thus gaining for Francis the church finances of 10 archbishoprics, 82 bishoprics, 527 abbeys, and multitudes of priories and canonries, and therefore no need to break from the papacy.¹

1. Information on Francis I can be found in R. J. Knecht, “Francis I: Prince and Patron of the Northern Renaissance,” in A. G. Dickens, ed., *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage, and Royalty, 1400–1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 99–119; Alistair Horne, *La Belle France: A Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Marshall B. Davidson, *The Horizon Concise History of France* (New York: American Heritage, 1971); Edith Simon, *The Reformation* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1966); and Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517–1559* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

Early success in pursuing French interests in Italy tempted Francis into repeated military adventures with less happy outcomes. For a time he was even held prisoner in Spain. Concerned about potential encirclement by the Hapsburg ring (Spanish, Dutch, Italian, and Austrian territories united in the person of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V), Francis's treatment of Protestants depended on shifting political circumstances. Although a Catholic whose practice was to attend daily mass before ten o'clock, he was not above making an alliance with the Protestant princes of Germany, or even with the Turks, when it served his interests.

Francis did, however, have sincere interests in the new learning of the Renaissance era, including the sphere of religious thought. In March of 1530 he established four royal professorships, two for Greek and two for Hebrew. His sister, Margaret of Angoulême, being influenced by the evangelical Catholic Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, wrote devotional poetry and also provided haven for some who were persecuted for religion. Francis twice, in 1523 and 1526, gained release from prison for the follower of Erasmus and Luther, Louis de Berquin, who was hastily condemned and burned as a heretic in 1529 while Francis was away from Paris. The chrism with which Francis was anointed at his coronation was believed to make the French king "the most Christian king," whose touch could heal the skin disease scrofula. In 1530 Francis so touched some 1,730 people. Such was the one whom John Calvin addressed as "Most Mighty and Illustrious Monarch, Francis, Most Christian King of the French."

The Context of Persecution

While Calvin might entertain some hope of appealing to the scholarly and religious interests of his Renaissance monarch, the immediate context of his writing is one of persecution. Indeed by his third paragraph he is denouncing the injustice of the French regime. He himself had gone into exile from his native France, apparently being implicated in the reforming inaugural address of Nicolas Cop, the new rector of the University of Paris, on November 1, 1533. Then, on October 18, 1534, the incident of the Placards, crude posters denouncing the idolatry of the mass, appearing on many public buildings and even in the king's bedchamber, led to severe

repression and burnings, including some of Calvin's personal friends and associates. Clearly, Francis's toleration for reform extended only up to the point of public disruption of society. To Calvin, however, those put to death were true martyrs of the Christian faith. And so, addressing the king on August 23, 1535,² he makes clear that he is not writing a personal defense, for although still loving his country, "as things now stand I do not much regret being excluded. Rather, I embrace the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself." Appealing to the king to find the leisure to read "this our confession," Calvin states that "a very great question is at stake: how God's glory may be kept safe on earth, how God's truth may retain its place of honor, how Christ's Kingdom may be kept in good repair among us."³ Feeling that he and his fellow Reformers are falsely accused of heresy and sedition, Calvin seeks to demonstrate the orthodoxy and orderly conduct of the Protestant movement.

The Reformers' Relationship to Scripture, the Early Fathers, and the Church

Claiming that the true religion is that which has been handed down in the Scriptures, and arguing against implicit faith in "the authority of Holy Mother Church" and "the primacy of the Apostolic See,"⁴ Calvin answers the charge of newness on the part of the Protestant Reformers by citing their agreement with many of the early church fathers on various of the doctrines and practices at issue. In a section running five pages on the "Misleading Claim That the Church Fathers Oppose the Reformation Teaching," he states, "If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the title of victory—to put it very modestly—would turn to

2. For the correct date of Calvin's address, see "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:31 and n. 51.

3. "Prefatory Address," 11. References to the king's finding opportunity to read the *Institutes* are on pp. 27 and 31. There is no evidence that Francis ever read the *Institutes* or even the "Prefatory Address" although it is certainly possible that he was made aware of Calvin's work.

4. "Prefatory Address," 14.

our side.”⁵ Calvin acknowledges that one cannot agree with the Fathers in everything, which is an allegiance owed only to Christ. But then he cites a litany of the Fathers to show that the Church of Rome has imposed many things that the ancient church did not accept (such as abstaining from meat, the begging of monks, images of Christ or saints, transubstantiation, participating in only one kind in the mass, many canons and doctrines without any word of God, laws of fasting, and celibacy of the clergy. Among those cited are Jerome; various bishops mentioned in Eusebius or in the histories by Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret (late fourth and fifth centuries); Ambrose (twice); Augustine (four times); Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis; the Council in Spain (c. 305); Gelasius (twice); John Chrysostom; Cyprian (twice); and Tertullian.⁶).

In October of 1536 Calvin, by now recruited by Guillaume Farel for the reform of Geneva, participated as a junior partner with Farel and Pierre Viret in a disputation with Roman Catholic churchmen at Lausanne. Remaining silent through the early part of the debate, Calvin leapt into action at the charge of one of the Catholic disputants that the Protestants despised antiquity. Calvin’s response shows once again that he had diligently studied the Fathers, and he was able to cite key passages from memory, referring off the cuff to Tertullian, Chrysostom, and six passages in Augustine, practically giving chapter and verse.⁷ This display of patristic scholarship confirmed Calvin’s claim that the early fathers tended to support the Reformation: “After Calvin had spoken, the Franciscan brother Jean Tandy stood up to announce his conversion to the gospel.”⁸

Calvin made the same sort of claim to support from the church fathers in his “Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto” on September 1, 1539. After Farel and Calvin had been expelled from Geneva in 1538, Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto sought to bring Geneva back into the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin responded from Strasbourg to Sadoletto’s treatise. Focusing on what constitutes the true church, Calvin cited

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 18–23.

7. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, Library of Christian Classics 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 40–42.

8. Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin, Student of the Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 28.

Chrysostom for emphasizing “the simple doctrine of the gospel.” Then he claimed the support of the ancient fathers:

But here you bring a charge against me. For you teach that all that has been approved for fifteen hundred years or more by the uniform consent of the faithful, is by our rashness torn up or destroyed. . . . You know, Sadolet, . . . not only that our agreement with antiquity is far closer than yours, but that all we have attempted has been to renew the ancient form of the church which, at first distorted and stained by illiterate men of indifferent character, was afterward criminally mangled and almost destroyed by the Roman pontiff and his faction.

I shall not press you so closely as to call you back to that form which the apostles instituted, though in it we have the only model of a true Church, and whosoever deviates from it in the smallest degree is in error. But to indulge you so far, I ask you to place before your eyes the ancient form of the Church as their writings prove it to have been in the ages of Chrysostom and Basil among the Greeks, and of Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine among the Latins; and after so doing, to contemplate the ruins of that Church which now survive among yourselves. . . . Will you here declare one an enemy of antiquity who, zealous for ancient piety and holiness and dissatisfied with the corrupt state of matters existing in a dissolute and despised Church, attempts to ameliorate its condition and restore it to pristine splendour?⁹

In his “Prefatory Address to King Francis” Calvin says, “Surely the church of Christ has lived and will live so long as Christ reigns at the right hand of his Father. . . . Against this church we now have no quarrel.” But whereas his opponents “contend that the form of the church is always apparent and observable” and “they set this form in the see of the Roman Church and its hierarchy,” he states that “it has quite another mark: namely, the pure preaching of God’s Word and the lawful administration of the sacraments.”¹⁰ Although the church, as in the Old Testament time of Elijah, is not always to be identified with external, visible institutions, Calvin’s citations of the church fathers

9. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 231–32.

10. “Prefatory Address,” 24–25.

shows that he readily identified with the church of the fourth and fifth centuries as representing classical Christianity, 60 percent of his citations in the *Institutes* and his Commentaries coming from Western fathers between the Councils of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451).¹¹

The Reformers' Relation to the Anabaptists

Having refuted the Roman Catholic charge of newness by showing the consistency of the Protestant Reformers with the orthodox ancient church, Calvin next answers the charge of seditious tumults resulting from the Reformation. In the contexts both of Martin Luther in Saxon Wittenberg and also of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich and German-speaking Switzerland, ecclesiastical reform approved by the civil magistrate had been soon accompanied by more radical reform usually characterized by believer's baptism and a separation of church and state. In the Dutch/northwestern German city of Münster, however, radical reform gained control of both ecclesiastical and civil government, and in the period 1533–35 produced a theocracy with community of goods and polygamy and resulted in a violent end.¹²

Writing his first edition of the *Institutes* in the year that the revolutionary theocracy of Münster was overturned and restored to order by Lutheran and Catholic forces, Calvin ascribes such tumults to the work of Satan, who always through history seeks to oppose the true faith with false religion. As was the case in the day of the apostles, so now in the Reformation there are movements that Satan has inspired in order to discredit the genuine Reformers. For his own part, Calvin disclaims to King Francis any effort to overthrow kingdoms: "we, from whom not one seditious word was ever heard . . . we, who do not cease

11. Lane, *John Calvin*, 41 n. 198, cites statistics from the work (in Dutch) of R. J. Mooi, *Het Kerk—en Dogmahistorisch Element in de Werken van Johannes Calvijn* (Wageningen: Veenman, 1965).

12. A detailed account is given in George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3d ed. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1992), 553–82. See also Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, 2 vols., 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907–8), 2:451–69.

to pray for yourself and your kingdom, although we are now fugitives from home.”¹³

The Purpose of the “Institutes”

As the “Prefatory Address to King Francis I” shows, therefore, the purpose of the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536 was both apologetic and instructional. In his rare autobiographical account, the “Author’s Preface” to his Commentary on the Psalms, dated July 22, 1557, Calvin describes how “whilst I lay hidden at Basle, and known only to a few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France,” and how these martyrs were falsely identified with “Anabaptists and seditious persons.” In this context,

it appeared to me, that unless I opposed them [the ones making false charges] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my Institute of the Christian Religion. My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord; and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them. When it was then published, it was not that copious and laboured work which it now is, but only a small treatise containing a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion; and it was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers.¹⁴

As the “Prefatory Address to King Francis I” was primarily apologetic, defending the Reformation against charges of newness and sedition, the

13. “Prefatory Address,” 30. See also Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

14. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:xli–xlii.

1536 first edition of the *Institutes* was a basic manual educating Calvin's followers in the Christian faith. By the final edition of 1559 the instructional purpose had expanded into the more systematic two volumes most familiar to readers today.

While the final 1559 edition evidently satisfied Calvin with its more systematic arrangement of doctrine, his purpose was still not speculative, but rather practical. As he said in "John Calvin to the Reader" introducing his 1559 edition, "God has filled my mind with zeal to spread his Kingdom and to further the public good," and "since I undertook the office of teacher in the church, I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness."¹⁵ And thus, after the 1536 edition, which he regarded as almost catechetical in treating the rudiments of the faith (the law, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments), was replaced by his own Geneva Catechism of 1537, his second edition of the *Institutes* (1539) was directed more to theological students preparing for ministry, rather than ordinary lay people. As he says in his introductory word to the 1559 edition, it

has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling.¹⁶

He was concerned to the end, nevertheless, not only for the theological student, but also for the ordinary Christian. In his "Subject Matter of the Present Work" introducing his final French edition of 1560 he wrote: "Perhaps the duty of those who have received from God fuller light than others is to help simple folk at this point, and as it were to lend them a hand, in order to guide them and help them to find the sum of what God meant to teach us in his Word."¹⁷

Two things should especially be noted in these statements of Calvin's purpose in producing the *Institutes*. One is that, whether he is thinking of theological students or of ordinary lay Christians, his

15. "John Calvin to the Reader," in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:4.

16. *Ibid.*

17. "Subject Matter of the Present Work," in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:6.

purpose is to provide a basis for the study of the Scriptures. As he appended to his 1560 French edition:

I can at least promise that it can be a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture. Thus, if henceforth our Lord gives me the means and opportunity of writing some commentaries, I shall use the greatest possible brevity, because there will be no need for long digressions, seeing that I have here treated at length almost all the articles pertaining to Christianity.¹⁸

The second thing to be noticed is that the ultimate purpose is godliness. The long title of the first edition underscores this point: “*Institutes of the Christian Religion, Embracing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety, and Whatever Is Necessary to Know of the Doctrine of Salvation: A Work Most Worthy to Be Read by All Persons Zealous for Piety. . .*”¹⁹ The goal, then, of use of the *Institutes* is study of God’s Word, which in turn is to produce godliness, a piety characterized by gratitude, love for God, and obedience to his revealed will.

The Place of the *Institutes* in the History of Theology

John T. McNeill claimed, “Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is one of the few books that have profoundly affected the course of

18. *Ibid.*, 1:7. These words appeared in an earlier edition, before Calvin’s first commentary, on Romans, published in 1540. See also his statement in “John Calvin to the Reader,” 5 (and n. 4): “If . . . I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approach Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool.”

19. Ford Lewis Battles, “Introduction” to the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), reprinted in Richard C. Gamble, ed., *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, 14 vols., vol. 2: *Calvin’s Early Writings and Ministry* (New York: Garland, 1992), 265. This entire article, 245–87, is very helpful in understanding Calvin’s purpose, as is I. John Hesselink, “The Development and Purpose of Calvin’s *Institutes*,” *Reformed Theological Review* 24 (1964): 65–72, reprinted in Gamble, ed., vol. 4, *Influences Upon Calvin and Discussion of the 1559 “Institutes,”* 209–16.

history.”²⁰ Philip Schaff similarly said: “This book is the masterpiece of a precocious genius of commanding intellectual and spiritual depth and power. It is one of the few truly classical productions in the history of theology, and has given its author the double title of the Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas of the Reformed Church.”²¹ Schaff goes on to describe how Roman Catholics called it “the Koran and Talmud of heresy” and had it burned by order of the Sorbonne at Paris and other places “and more fiercely and persistently persecuted than any book of the sixteenth century; but . . . it has found also great admirers among Catholics who . . . freely admit its great merits in the nonpolemical parts.”²² Indeed, a more modern Roman Catholic scholar describes how Calvin drew on the work of other Reformers, saying that “it is indisputable that Calvin was from the start superior to Luther in his careful biblical and patristic documentation”:

As a young theologian, Calvin cannot be compared to a musical performer or to an orchestra conductor whose task is limited to interpreting faithfully a piece of music; rather, he is like a composer who borrows several themes and then orchestrates them according to his personal inspiration. Calvin makes the themes of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, and Bucer resound at times *forte* and at other times *piano* and interprets them into a composition that is his own.²³

Another modern interpreter, Protestant but outside the Reformed tradition, gives this assessment:

Almost certainly Calvin’s great reputation is due to his personal passion and leadership and his magnificent systematic mind as it is expressed in his magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in several editions over his lifetime. It became *the* textbook

20. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 119.

21. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols., 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 8:329.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 232.

for Reformed theology for centuries and is still published, analyzed, interpreted and debated.²⁴

The *Institutes* did indeed gain immediate acceptance among Reformed Protestants. As Schaff reports: “The Evangelicals greeted the *Institutes* at once with enthusiastic praise as the clearest, strongest, most logical, and most convincing defence of Christian doctrines since the days of the apostles.” A few weeks after its publication Martin Bucer wrote to the author: “It is evident that the Lord has elected you as his organ for the bestowment of the richest fulness of blessing to his Church.”²⁵ McNeill adds, “The *Institutes* . . . was a pronounced success. Within a year the publisher informed him that the stock was exhausted and that a revised edition was called for.”²⁶

How is one to account for this impact of the *Institutes*? Schaff rightly contrasts it with the “rousing power” of Luther’s “Appeal to the German Nobility” or his “On Christian Liberty” upon German readers, “but it is a book for scholars of all nations, and had a deeper and more lasting effect upon them than any work of the Reformers.” He comments on how it “combines dogmatics and ethics in organic unity,” how it is planted “on the immovable rock of the Word of God, as the only safe guide in matters of faith and duty,” how it makes “judicious and discriminating use of the fathers,” and how its “style is luminous and forcible.”²⁷ More modern scholars have put the greater emphasis on Calvin’s rhetoric. McNeill concludes: “It is not Calvin’s logic but the vigor of his rhetoric and his rarely matched powers of communication, under the sway of religious conviction and emotion, that constitute him, through the *Institutes*, one of the makers of the modern mind.”²⁸

One of the most recent biographers of Calvin has viewed the *Institutes* through an architectural analogy:

24. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 408.

25. Schaff, *History*, 8:329.

26. McNeill, *History and Character*, 125.

27. Schaff, *History*, 8:330–31.

28. McNeill, *History and Character*, 128.

One enters into the *Institutes* as though into a cathedral, a sort of gigantic edifice where the succession of words, paragraphs, and chapters testifies to the glory of God and the enterprise of man. . . .

The *Institutes* is a stone structure, built to last. . . .

The *Institutes* is built over time, a cathedral in which every pillar, every pilaster is endowed with a history. A primitive cord goes back to 1536; it has the charm, the sturdiness of the Romanesque churches. . . .

The edition of 1539–41 adds to this structure a patristic, or more precisely Augustinian, porch. . . .

The third great version was completed in 1559, after several intermediate stages. The text is now four and a half times longer than the original. While preserving the grand architectural principles of 1539, this internal remodeling establishes books, distinguished according to their content. This increasing complexity already takes on a baroque character, expansion conflicting with strict order.²⁹

Calvin himself saw the *Institutes* as embodying his theological thought in its original and also its most mature form:

“The whole of Calvinism is in the *Institutes*—a work of capital importance, the work most valued by Calvin, who spent all his life revising and reshaping as well as enriching it. All his other works—commentaries, controversies, smaller dogmatic or moral treatises—are related to it like advanced redoubts meant to defend the heart of the place against the enemy.” Not only do the *Institutes* occupy the central place in Calvin’s literary production. . . . Whatever interest and value may attach to his other theological writings, the *Institutes* are the faithful summary of the ideas he expounded in them. Moreover, the *Institutes*—at least in their final form—purport to give a complete account of Christian teaching. They therefore present a synthesis of Calvinist thought, and one that is sufficient in itself; whereas to define the positions of a Luther or a Zwingli, one must have recourse to writings very different from one another.³⁰

29. Bernard Cottret, *Calvin, A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 309–10.

30. François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 111, quoting Imbart de la Tour, *Calvin et l’Institution chrétienne*, 55.

And yet, as we have seen, Calvin's purpose in producing the *Institutes* was to provide a foundation for the study of the Bible, whether by theological students or by lay Christians—in other words, a platform on which his commentaries could build. And as a result his commentaries could be concise and to the point, not as wordy and voluminous as those of Martin Bucer, nor organized by commonplaces as in the works of Philipp Melanchthon.

It is this relation between theology and exegesis of Scripture that gives distinctive character to the Reformed faith. And the Reformed faith is aptly termed "Calvinism" because it is Calvin's *Institutes* that establishes this relation between theology and exegesis. Richard C. Gamble suggests the connection between the *duplex cognitio dei* (the interrelatedness of knowledge of God and knowledge of self) in the *Institutes* and *brevitas et facilitas* (comprehensive brevity) in the commentaries. He argues that Calvin's method was distinct from such predecessors as Luther, Zwingli, John Oecolampadius, and Bucer, and from such contemporaries as Henry Bullinger and Theodore Beza in that he maintained a consciousness of the Creator/creature distinction in his theology and sought in his commentaries to imitate the apostle Paul in using the "simple and rude" style of the Scriptures just as the Creator had accommodated to the unlearned creatures in his revealed Word.³¹

Zwingli and Oecolampadius, leaders of the German-speaking Swiss Reform in Zurich and Basel, died in 1531. Before Luther died in 1546 he is reported by Melanchthon's son-in-law to have applauded Calvin's 1540 "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ," even though it described candidly how Luther and Zwingli had failed to understand each other on the one point (out of fifteen) of the Lord's Supper at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529.³² The Strasbourg Reformer Martin Bucer taught at Cambridge University from 1549 until his death in 1551; his enthusiastic approval of Calvin's *Institutes* has already been

31. Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete: Is There Anything New?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 178–94, reprinted in Gamble, ed., *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7, *The Organizational Structure of Calvin's Theology*, 44–60; see especially 54–58.

32. *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 507.

noted. By the time of the publication of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin was recognized as the chief theologian of the Protestant Reformation. That reputation would continue in Reformed circles because of the distinctive relation between theology and the exegesis of Scripture as propounded and lived out in the context of the church. Particularly in the English-speaking world this would be apparent in such subsequent theologians as John Owen in the seventeenth century, Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century, Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield in the nineteenth century, and J. Gresham Machen, J. Oliver Buswell Jr., and John Murray in the twentieth century. Like Calvin, these theologians were expositors of Scripture and also preachers of the Word in the context of the church.

In his "Address to King Francis I" John Calvin's eloquent apology is not unlike those of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century. They had to establish Christianity's continuity with the true faith of ancient Judaism in the Old Testament and also to distinguish true New Testament Christianity from the bizarre and false claims of Gnosticism. In like manner Calvin needed to defend Protestantism as consistent with the orthodox Christian church of the early fathers and the church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries while also distancing the Reformers from the polygamous, seditious, and violent acts of certain Anabaptists. Whether the Renaissance king of France heard him or not, generations of followers in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, England, America, and around the world have listened, studied, and claimed to be Calvinists because the theology of the *Institutes* is based upon, and points to, the Scriptures as the very Word of the living and true God, whom to know is life eternal.



Twenty-one contributors, including some leading Calvin scholars, provide a groundbreaking section-by-section analysis of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. They supply essential background information; further develop Calvin's discussions of topics including prayer, ethics, faith, assurance, and church and state government; and conclude with a valuable bibliography of Calvin resources.

A long-needed work, this volume serves as the natural companion to Calvin's magnum opus for classes, students, pastors, and others.

"A very valuable volume, which I commend with enthusiasm. For making Calvin known today as well as once he was, and in every age deserves to be, this really is a major step forward."

—**J. I. Packer**, Board of Governors' Professor, Regent College, Vancouver

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