

The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How
Christ
restored
the gospel
to his
church



The Institutes... 1536-1559

John Calvin is known for many things.

He is known for being the pastor at Geneva.

He is known for being one the principal leaders of the second generation of the Reformation.

He is known for his many sermons, for his many letters, and for his exegetically concise and insightful commentaries on most of the books of the Bible.

He is known for a number of books many of which were important enough in and of themselves to have secured for him a place in church history.

But he is known principally for one book, a book entitled the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It is one of those books that stand above all others. It is in the

short list of the most influential Christian books not of the 15th or 16th centuries but of all times.

A few years ago I was asked by a religion editor to write an article for the Ft. Worth Star Telegram regarding the ten most important Christian books of all time and I included it as one of the top 10 Christian books of all time along with: **On the Incarnation** by Athanasius, the **Confessions** of St. Augustine, the **City of God** by St. Augustine, **Why the God Man?** by St. Anselm, the **Bondage of the Will** by Martin Luther, the **Pilgrim's Progress** by John Bunyan, **Religious Affections** by Jonathan Edwards, and **Mere Christianity** by C.S. Lewis.

Now some of those books are debatable. Calvin's book is not one of them. In fact, if I had to just pick one book as the most important Christian book ever it would be a real toss-up between Augustine **Confessions** and Calvin's **Institutes** with the **Institutes** winning out in the end simply because of the influence it has had on post-Reformation Christianity and especially on the theology of the Puritans and Church in America.

Now the title of the work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a strange title to the modern ear. I once knew a man that hated Calvin because he hated the title to his book. His thought went something like this, "Any man that thinks that he has the right to name a book that claims to be the formative book of the Christian Religion is so arrogant that he cannot be trusted or even tolerated." But, of course, that is not what Calvin meant at all by the title. David Calhoun, professor of historical theology at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis writes this:

The Latin word does not exactly mean what the word “institute” means today. Today, an institute is a school or perhaps a seminar or something like that. It is related to that, but the word simply means “instruction”—instruction in the Christian religion. It could mean “the manual of Christian doctrine.” The medieval term that was almost always used was “*summa*.” *Summa Theologica* is Thomas Aquinas’ summary of theology. Calvin uses the word “*summa*” in his text, but he does not use it for his title. The title is simply, “Instruction in Christian Doctrine or in Christianity.” If we were trying to modernize the title, we would say something like “Basic Instruction in the Christian Faith.” However, we are used to *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, so that is what we will use.¹

Now Calvin wrote the *Institutes* when he was only twenty-five or so. He originally wrote it to be both a help to younger Christians and as an apology for the Reformed faith in general. Now when I use the word “apology” I am using it in its classical sense and not in the modern sense. What I mean by that is this. He wrote the *Institutes* to explain Reformed Christianity...to explain how the faith of the Reformers was biblical and why they ought not to be persecuted. He did not write the *Institutes* to try to apologize for the Reformer’s positions or beliefs.

Now to be honest I think his principal purpose for the first edition of the *Institutes* was really more apologetical than instructional. I say that because it was written in Latin alone and was never actually translated into French.² The work had an open letter to the King of France attached to its beginning. In his book, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* Wulfert De Greef writes this:

Calvin also intended that the *Institutes* serve as a confessional defense to the king for the evangelicals in France, who were being identified with Anabaptist rebels and were being severely persecuted. In their writings, traditional Roman Catholics and Christian humanists alike had equated the evangelicals with Anabaptist

agitators. The king had also signed a manifesto to the German Protestant princes in which he tried to gloss over the persecution of evangelicals after the *affaire deplacards*. According to the king, the evangelicals were not on the same level with the German Protestants, for the evangelicals were Anabaptist rebels against whom the authorities had to take action. By means of the *Institutes* Calvin wished to inform the king about the motivation of those disposed to reformation. In his letter to the king, he distances himself from the Anabaptists and refutes the accusations brought against the evangelicals, showing himself especially sensitive to the Roman Catholic charge of sectarianism.³

Let me read for you a bit of the open letter Calvin addressed to the French king.

When I first set my hand to this work, nothing was farther from my mind, most glorious King, than to write something that might afterward be offered to Your Majesty. My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labor especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I knew to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; but I saw very few who had been duly imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching.

But I perceived that the fury of certain wicked persons has prevailed so far in your realm that there is no place in it for sound doctrine. Consequently, it seemed to me that I should be doing something worthwhile if I both gave instruction to them and made confession before you with the same work. From this you may learn the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage who today disturb your realm with fire and sword. And indeed I shall not fear to confess that here is contained almost the sum of that very doctrine which they shout must be punished by prison, exile, proscription, and fire, and be exterminated on land and sea.⁴

A bit into his letter, Calvin writes this:

For this reason, most invincible King, I not unjustly ask you to undertake a full inquiry into this case, which until now has been handled — we may even say,

tossed about — with no order of law and with violent heat rather than judicial gravity. And do not think that I am here preparing my own personal defense, thereby to return safely to my native land. Even though I regard my country with as much natural affection as becomes me, as things now stand I do not much regret being excluded. Rather, I embrace the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself — a cause completely torn and trampled in your realm today, lying, as it were, utterly forlorn, more through the tyranny of certain Pharisees than with your approval.⁵

So I think you can see that the initial publication of Calvin's *Institutes* was written principally to get the King of France off the backs of the French Reformed Christians. Persecution had broken out and was rampant. Calvin was on the run as was his friend Nicholas Cop and Calvin had had personal friends killed for the cause of the Reformation. Calvin wanted to defend his fellow French Christians against the charge of disloyalty and sedition.

David Calhoun writes this:

Why did Calvin write the *Institutes*? He wrote the book probably in the year 1534 or 1535, just after he had been converted to Protestantism. He wrote the first edition of the *Institutes* to provide instruction to French Protestants. In the book he tells us that he himself is just beginning along this route of Bible and theological study. He says, "Even though I was just beginning, others were coming to me and asking me for help." So he wanted to set forth, in an organized way, the teaching of the Bible in order to help his fellow French citizens who had converted to Protestantism to have a clear statement of their faith. He published the book in 1536 for that purpose—to provide instruction for French Protestants—but also to present a Protestant confession of faith to King Francis I of France. We have that preparatory address in the McNeill/Battles edition of the *Institutes*, and that stays in all the editions all the way down to the last one in 1559. It is Calvin's statement to the King of France: "This is what we are. This is what we believe."⁶

Now we have no idea whether the King of France ever read Calvin's *Institutes* or not. But what we do know is the subsequent editions of the *Institutes* focused a lot less on an apologetical end and a lot more on an instructional end.

Randall Zachman wrote this in the Calvin Theological Journal.

From the second edition of 1539 to the final edition of 1559, Calvin wrote the *Institutes* "to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology," which more than likely meant those who were preparing to be pastors in the evangelical churches.⁷

Now I think that is really important. That is, in the subsequent editions of the *Institutes* Calvin changed his focus from simply tried to defend the faith against persecutions to using it to educate and prepare pastors and lay people to preach the gospel.

Calvin himself writes this:

Moreover, 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. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.⁸

Now I should add that there were really five different editions of the *Institutes*. There were, of course, reprints of some of the editions but there were five different editions in which the work was expanded or changed.

The first edition...the shortest...was first published in 1536. The modern English version of this first edition of the *Institutes* is about 200 pages long.⁹ Then there were other editions published in 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559. The modern English edition of the 1559 edition is 1521 pages long.

Calhoun writes this:

Then, from 1536 to the last edition in 1559, he expanded the *Institutes*—they get bigger and bigger—to serve as an introduction to Scripture. During this time, Calvin was also writing commentaries. His purpose was to have the *Institutes* as a kind of theological introduction to Scripture so that he did not have to deal with theological issues out of context. He wanted to do his Bible commentaries in a very simple, straightforward way and not have long excursus at various points in order to develop a theological topic, which was the typical way that theology was written in the sixteenth century and before.

I like that very much and think it is very helpful. As Calvin rewrote the *Institutes* he changed both the focus and the structure of the work. He changed the structure and he changed his target audience. The first work was in Latin only.¹⁰ The subsequent works were in both Latin and French. What Calvin wanted to accomplish in his subsequent editions was to provide training for those wishing to advance in the faith. That training was both theological and exegetical. In other words, the *Institutes* were to provide the theological grid work to help pastors and teachers to use his commentaries to understand their Bibles. You can tell that from the fact that he says he wanted to especially provide theological training for pastors and preachers but in a way that was accessible to all.

Randall Zachman writes this:

Over and above these essential personal qualities and dispositions, what other learning does Calvin appear to assume on the part of his candidates for sacred theology? In terms of their mental capacity, Calvin appears to be aiming for a reader of average insight and intelligence. He speaks of his readers as being moderately discerning, of average judgment and of slight intelligence. Although he acknowledges that the teaching of the philosophers may at times be useful and true, he also seeks to address himself to the capacity of all. Hence, Calvin seems to be aiming his teaching to the mental capacities of the average reader of Latin texts, assuming that the reader is of sound judgment but not brilliant.¹¹

What that means is that the Institutes were designed to be accessible to just about anybody.

Now one of the things that I think is both true and funny is that Calvin really, really focused on being brief. He absolutely despised long-windedness. In the *Institutes* he constantly says things like, "I could say more about this but in order to maintain the brevity of the work will not."

Listen to what he writes in a later edition of the *Institutes*:

By nature I love brevity; and perhaps if I wished to speak more amply it would not be successful. But though a more extended form of teaching were highly acceptable, I would nevertheless scarcely care to undertake it. Moreover, the plan of the present work demands that we give a simple outline of doctrine as briefly as possible.¹²

Now I said that his focus on brevity was both funny and true. Here's what I mean. That particular quote occurs on like pg. 685 of his work.¹³ Still Calvin is brief. He covers a world of material and does so with a conciseness and clarity that is breathtaking.

In his first French edition of the *Institutes* Calvin wrote that he wanted to focus on brevity, comprehensiveness, and order of method. In fact, in the subtitle of the *Institutes* he called the work a summary...a *summa*...of doctrine. Randall Zachman writes this:

The clearest description comes in the preface to the work written in 1539, in which Calvin claims that the work contains a sum of religion in all its parts. In the *Institutes* itself Calvin calls his book a "summary of doctrine (*summa doctinae*)" in particular a "summary of Evangelical doctrine (*summa Evangelicae doctinae*)." There are three things in particular that the genre of *summa* raises in Calvin's mind: brevity, comprehensiveness, and order or method.

In his *summa*, Calvin seeks to set forth his sum of evangelical doctrine with as much brevity as possible.¹⁴

Now part of the reason Calvin wanted to be brief is because commentators and theologians in his day tended to pursue rabbit trails. That is, they tended to digress into long drawn out discussion of the various things that were important to them. Calvin hated that. He hated idle speculation. In fact, he often warns of trying to go where Scripture does not go. He warns that such wanderings are like falling into a labyrinth...what a great word.

For example, he writes this about predestination.

First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.¹⁵

And he writes this about the Trinity.

But if some distinction does exist in the one divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit — something hard to grasp — and occasions to certain minds more difficulty and trouble than is expedient, let it be remembered that men's minds, when they indulge their curiosity, enter into a labyrinth. And so let them yield themselves to be ruled by the heavenly oracles, even though they may fail to capture the height of the mystery.

Indeed, vanity joined with pride can be detected in the fact that, in seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation; thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations. They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption.¹⁶

But if some distinction does exist in the one divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit — something hard to grasp — and occasions to certain minds more difficulty and trouble than is expedient, let it be remembered that men's minds, when they indulge their curiosity, enter into a labyrinth.¹⁷

Calvin wanted only to be biblical. He wanted to focus on the Bible...to understand the Bible...and to teach what the Bible says...and nothing more. Randall Zachman puts it like this:

Calvin repeatedly insists that he teaches nothing more, and nothing less, than can be drawn from Scripture. "I desire only... that we should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, that we should not neglect what he has brought into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other." This relationship with Scripture, as we shall see, is directly related to the objective that Calvin sets for the *Institutes*, namely, to show readers of Scripture what to look for as they read it.¹⁸

Now let me talk for just a moment about the order of the *Institutes* and then I want to make a couple of recommendations about reading the *Institutes* or looking at some other resources on the *Institutes* and I'll be done.

In the first edition of the *Institutes*, the 1536 edition, Calvin followed the same pattern as almost all the other theologians of his day. That is, he structured his book around the Ten Commandments, The Apostle's Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. He then added a chapter on the Sacraments, one on the False Sacraments of the Catholic Church and a combined chapter on Christian freedom, ecclesiastical power and civil government. That's six chapters in all.

But Calvin was never really satisfied with that arrangement. He kept tweaking it trying to improve not just the content but also the structure or order in which things were presented. In fact, he wrote this near the end of his life:

Not only did I attempt this in the second edition, but each time the work has been reprinted since then, it has been enriched with some additions. Although I did not regret the labor spent, I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth. Now I trust that I have provided something that all of you will approve.¹⁹

Of course, Calvin is talking about his final 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. Now that thing of which he wants us to approve is a massive work of nearly fifteen hundred pages divided into four books which are then divided into eighty chapters. He starts Book 1 of the 1559 edition by writing, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." And you can see that idea unfold as the work develops. What I mean by that is this, he follows that idea throughout the book. The four books are: Book 1...the Knowledge of God the Creator, Book 2...the Knowledge of God the Redeemer, Book 3...The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ, and Book 4...The External Means by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Hold Us Therein.

Now I don't think you ought to let the length of the *Institutes* intimidate you. The text itself is pretty easy to understand. That doesn't mean Calvin is always simple but he is always biblical. He includes almost 7,000 Bible references in the *Institutes*. He is easy enough to read especially if you are reading the modern Battles' edition.

Let me give you just a sample taken from his chapter on "Faith as the Work of the Spirit."

...faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the terms commonly employed to express his power and working are, in large measure, referred to it because by faith alone he leads us into the light of the gospel, as John teaches: to believers in Christ is given the privilege of becoming children of God, who are born not of flesh and blood, but of God [John 1:12-13]. Contrasting God with flesh and blood, he declares it to be a supernatural gift that those who would otherwise remain in unbelief receive Christ by faith. Similar to this is that reply of Christ's: "Flesh and blood have not revealed it to you, but my Father, who is in heaven" [Matthew 16:17]. I am now touching briefly upon these things because I have already treated them at length elsewhere. Like this, too, is the saying of Paul's that the Ephesians had been "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" [Ephesians 1:13]. Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears. Similarly, where he says that the Thessalonians have been chosen by God "in sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth" [2Thessalonians 2:13], he is briefly warning us that faith itself has no other source than the Spirit. John explains this more clearly: "We know that he abides in us from the Spirit whom he has given us" [1 John 3:24]. Likewise, "From this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." [1 John 4:13.] Therefore, Christ promised to his disciples' "the Spirit of truth that the world cannot receive" [John 14:17] that they might be capable of receiving heavenly wisdom. And, as the proper office of the Spirit, he assigned the task of bringing to mind what he had taught by mouth.

Now in case that still seems too difficult, there is a condensed version of Calvin's *Institutes* edited by Donald McKim that reduces the full 1500 or so pages to around 200 pages. It is a very easy read and definitely worthwhile for any layman that wants to begin to wrap his mind around Calvin's work. Let me read you the same section I just read from McKim's abridgment.

But faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the terms commonly employed to express his power and working are, in large measure, referred to it because by faith alone he leads us into the light of the gospel...Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher buy whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds...a promise that otherwise would only strike the air or bat upon our ears...Consequently, he may be rightly called the key that unlocks for us the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven; and his illumination, the keenness of our insight.²⁰

Now that seems pretty simple doesn't it?

One other resource you may want to make use of is the site located at <http://www.worldwide-classroom.com/>. The site is our own denominational seminary and you can sign up for classes taught at the seminary. The webpage provides both pdf's of the lessons and mp3's as well. There are a number of course on the webpage but, of course, the one I am thinking you might be interested is the one by David C, Calhoun over Calvin's *Institutes*. The webpage offers a significant study that is 24 lessons long but, of course, it's all free.

Alright, let's pray.

¹ David C, Calhoun, "Introducing the *Institutes*" Lesson 1B downloaded from Worldwide Classroom Courses <http://www.worldwide-classroom.com/courses/info/ch523/> .

² W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin* translated by Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 202. He writes, "It is striking that although Calvin wrote the 1536 *Institutes* for the

instruction of the common people, we know of no French translation of the work. Calvin also intended that the *Institutes* serve as a confessional defense to the king for the evangelicals in France, who were being identified with Anabaptist rebels and were being severely persecuted.”

³ W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin* translated by Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 202.

⁴ John Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France” in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David C, Calhoun, “The Structure and Organization of Calvin’s Institutes I” Lesson 1 downloaded from Worldwide Classroom Courses.

<http://www.worldwide-classroom.com/courses/info/ch523/> .

⁷ Randall C. Zachman, “What Kind of Book is Calvin's Institutes?” in the Calvin Theological Journal 35 no 2 N 2000, 240.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 1, 57.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 Edition* translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 1-226.

¹⁰ W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin* translated by Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 202. He writes, “In a letter to Francois Daniel in Orleans on October 13, 1536 Calvin indicated his plan to translate the *Institutes* into French, but no such French edition is known. The Latin edition quickly sold out.”

Probably what that means is that Calvin decided to wait to print an updated and expanded version rather than go back and translate the previous version in French. The new work would be in French and that would suffice.

¹¹ Zachman, 241.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 3, 156.

¹³ David C, Calhoun, “Introducing the Institutes” Lesson 1B downloaded from Worldwide Classroom Courses <http://www.worldwide-classroom.com/courses/info/ch523/> , 4.

¹⁴ Zachman, 247.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 3, 411.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 1, 91.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 1, 190.

¹⁸ Zachman, 243-244.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 1, 56.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Abridged Edition* edited by Donald McKim (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 66.