

Church History (28): The Life and Ministry of John Calvin (2)

Having considered his early years and conversion, ministry in Geneva, marriage, later years and death, we come this week to his major theological writings. We will limit our consideration to his, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

I. The Life and Ministry of John Calvin (2)

1. *Its various editions.* Calvin's first addition of his *Institutes* was written in 1536, and his final addition appeared in 1559. In 1536 it consisted of six chapters, in 1539 seventeen chapters, in 1545 twenty-one chapters, and in 1559 eighty chapters. "In all he produced eight editions of the Latin text (1536, 1539, 1543, 1545, 1550, 1553, 1554, 1559) and five translations into French (1541, 1545, 1551, 1553, 1560)" (George).¹ Its title remained substantially the same: *Institutes of the Christian Religion (Institutio Christianae Religionis)*. "The word *Institutio* must be understood in its Latin sense of instruction. It can be translated *Manual*, or more exactly *Summary*. In brief, a book destined to teach the Christian religion" (Benoit).² Calvin prefaced the first addition with an *Epistle to the King*, written in French, which was also found in every subsequent edition. "Calvin wished to clear the Evangelicals in France from the charge of rebellion which had been brought against them and by which the persecutions were justified. He demonstrated to Francis I that the faith of the persecuted was that of the Gospel" (Benoit).³ Calvin himself provided the purpose of the *Institutes* in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms: "When it was then published, it was not that copious and labored 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 scandalous and treacherous flatterers."⁴

The first major theological work that Calvin published was the *Institutes*. It became the centerpiece of his vast theological legacy, his most important, best-known, and most influential work. The *Institutes* was a clear statement of the doctrinal standards of the Reformation. The first edition was published in 1536 as a primer on biblical teaching; it contained 111 pages in six large chapters. Over the years, Calvin expanded the *Institutes* through five editions, enlarging it from eighty-five thousand to four hundred and fifty thousand words. Calvin's thesis was that the Protestant Reformation was consistently biblical and not a novelty. The *Institutes* was a reliable restatement of the orthodox teaching of the prophets and apostles, as well as the Church Fathers.⁵

"Published before Calvin's name was well known beyond the circle of his personal acquaintance, the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) comprised 111 pages in six large chapters" (Johnson).⁶ "Of the six chapters, four were given respectively to the Law, the Creed, the Lords' Supper, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This conformed to the classical pattern of catechism. The last two chapters, in more polemical manner, dealt respectively with false sacraments and with Christian liberty" (Benoit).⁷ While further editions were expanded, the basic content found in the first edition is retained in subsequent editions. "Although the work has been vastly improved under the revising hand of the author, in size and fulness of statement, the first edition contains all the essential features of his

¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 193

² Jean-Daniel Benoit, *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, 103

³ Jean-Daniel Benoit, *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, 103

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, xlii

⁵ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 439

⁶ Philip Johnson, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine and Doxology*, 99-100

⁷ Jean-Daniel Benoit, *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, 103

system" (Schaff).⁸ "The book immediately gained Calvin respect, support, and followers among Protestants worldwide. It was a scholarly work, yet clear, concise, and compelling. It was also a perfect answer to the persecutors of Protestantism, because it was dispassionate, meticulous in its reasoning, and thoroughly biblical—neither accusatory nor overtly defensive, but a positive affirmation of Protestant belief" (Johnson).⁹ "The Evangelicals greeted the *Institutes* at once with enthusiastic praise as the clearest, strongest, most logical, and most convincing defense of Christian doctrines since the days of the apostles. A few weeks after its publication 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'" (Schaff).¹⁰

In the first edition of this work of ours I did not in the least expect that success which, out of His infinite goodness, the Lord has given. Thus, for the most part I treated the subject summarily, as is usually done in small works. But when I realized that it was received by almost all godly men with a favor for which I never would have ventured to wish, much less to hope, I deeply felt that I was much more favored than I deserved. Consequently, I thought that I should be showing extreme ingratitude not to try at least, to the best of my slender ability, to respond to this warm appreciation for me, an appreciation that demanded my further diligence. Not only did I attempt this in the second edition, but each time the work has been reprinted since then, it was 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.¹¹

2. *Its structure and content.* The larger or fuller title of the *Institutes* is: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Containing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety and Whatever it is Necessary to Know in the Doctrine of Salvation.* "For Calvin, and his contemporaries, *piety* was a praiseworthy dutifulness or faithful devotion to one's family, country, or God. Calvin insistently affirms that *piety* is a prerequisite for any sound knowledge of God."¹² Calvin himself defines *piety* as follows: "I call *piety* that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of His benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by His fatherly care, that He is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond Him—they will never yield Him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in Him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to Him."¹³ The primary source of the *Institutes* is the Holy Scripture. Calvin quotes the Old and New Testaments thousands of times. His primary extra-biblical sources are the church fathers, medieval theologians, and other Reformers. "As early as the *Institutes* of 1536, in what he writes about the faculties of the human soul, he quotes Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, as well as John Chrysostom, Origen and St. Augustine" (Wedel).¹⁴ His five most quoted authors are: Augustine (900x), Peter Martyr Vermigli (600x), Peter Lombard (120x), Thomas Aquinas (100x), and Bernard of Clairvaux (60x). "Upon points of doctrine he borrows from Augustine with both hands: he draws inspiration from his doctrines of free will and of the sacraments, and in the chapters on grace and on predestination he employs all the Augustinian arguments to his purpose" (Wendel).¹⁵ And while he doesn't quote them often, his

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:335

⁹ Philip Johnson, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine and Doxology*, 101

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:329

¹¹ John Calvin, from Preface of final edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:3

¹² From Introduction, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1: lii

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1

¹⁴ Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 123-124

¹⁵ Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 124-125

dependence upon Luther and Bucer is most evident. "It is true that one would have to take some trouble to find in Calvin's writing any complete argument or even phrases borrowed literally from Luther: but the influence of Luther, though of a more subtle nature, undeniably exists none the less. This is evident in the planning of the *Institutes* of 1536, which reproduces the order of the contents of Luther's *Little Catechism*" (Wendel).¹⁶

In its final form, the *Institutes* are divided into four Books, with each one subdivided into chapters. Book I is on the knowledge of God the creator and has seventeen chapters; Book II is on the knowledge of God the Redeemer and has seventeen chapters; Book III is on the way in which we receive the grace of Christ and has twenty-five chapters; Book IV is on the Church and the means of grace and has twenty chapters. These additions allow Calvin to title the *Institutes* in the subtitle of the final addition: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, now first arranged in four books and divided by definite headings in a very convenient way: also enlarged by so much added matter that it can almost be regarded as a new work*. This division is loosely based on the Apostle's Creed. "I believe in God the Father almighty; Creator of heaven and earth (Book I), and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord (Book II); I believe in the Holy Spirit (Book III); I believe in the holy Catholic Church" (Book IV). "By setting out the *Institutes* like this, Calvin was making an important point: Protestants had not invented new doctrines of their own; they were simply rejecting the various errors that had grown up in the Western Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, and returning to the pure apostolic faith of the early Church" (Needham).¹⁷

(1) Book I (The Knowledge of God the Creator). "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."¹⁸ "Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinize himself."¹⁹ By knowledge of God as Creator, Calvin meant the knowledge man has of God through creation. "Here I do not yet touch upon the sort of knowledge with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator; but I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright."²⁰ (a) Knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in men. "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God Himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of His divine majesty."²¹ This innate knowledge is "either smothered or corrupted, partly by ignorance, partly by malice."²² "As experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens—much less shows fruit in season."²³ "Men by nature entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God's glory. Yet that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits."²⁴ (b) Knowledge of God is obtained through general revelation. For Calvin, God reveals His glory throughout creation, and especially man himself.

¹⁶ Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 132-133

¹⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:208

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.2

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.1

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.4

"Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, He not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses Himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see Him. Indeed, His essence is incomprehensible; hence, His divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon His individual works He has engraved unmistakable marks of His glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."²⁵ "Certain philosophers, accordingly, long ago not ineptly called man a microcosm because he is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom, and contains within himself enough miracles to occupy our minds, if only we are not irked at paying attention to them. Indeed, if there is no need to go outside ourselves to comprehend God, what pardon will the indolence of that man deserve who is loath to descend within himself to find God."²⁶ And yet, while God reveals Himself through creation, "the evidence of God in creation does not profit us." "But although the Lord represents both Himself and His everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of His works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us."²⁷ (c) Knowledge of God is increased through special revelation. Calvin explains the need for Scripture and its nature (chapters 6-9); God and the Trinity (chapters 10-14); man (chapter 15); and providence (chapters 16-18). While creation provides a dim knowledge of God, it's only in Scripture that "God bestows the actual knowledge of Himself upon us." "While that brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude, it was needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe."²⁸

(2) Book II (The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ: First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and then to us in the Gospel). Book II contains a treatment of original sin and the depravity of man (chapters 1-5); an explanation of the law (chapters 6-8); the similarities and differences between the two testaments (chapters 9-11); the person of Christ (chapters 12-14); and the work of Christ (chapters 15-17). Calvin provides five differences between the two testaments in chapter eleven. "You may ask: will no difference remain between the Old and New Testaments? What is to become of the many passages of Scripture wherein they are contrasted as utterly different? I freely admit the differences in Scripture, to which attention is called, but in such a way as not to detract from its established unity. These chief differences, as far as I can note or remember, are five in number."²⁹ (a) The Old Covenant was based on earthly promises, whereas the New on heavenly promises. "Now this is the first difference: the Lord of old willed that His people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage; yet, to nourish them better in this hope, He displayed it for them to see and, so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits. But now that the gospel has more plainly and clearly revealed the grace of the future life, the Lord leads our minds to meditate upon it directly, laying aside the lower mode of training that he used with the Israelites."³⁰ "The earthly promises corresponded to the childhood of the church in the Old Covenant; but were not to chain hope to earthly things. The same church existed among them, but as yet in its childhood. Therefore, keeping them under this tutelage, the Lord gave, not spiritual promises unadorned and open, but ones foreshadowed, in a measure, by earthly promises."³¹ "God willed that, for the time during which He gave His covenant to the people of Israel in a veiled form, the grace of future and eternal happiness be signified and figured under earthly benefits, the gravity of spiritual

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.3

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.10

²⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.1

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.1

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.1

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.2

death under physical punishments."³² (b) The Old Covenant was conveyed by images and ceremonies, typifying Christ. "The second difference between the Old and New Testaments consists in figures: that, in the absence of the reality, it showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance; the New Testament reveals the very substance of truth as present. This difference is mentioned almost wherever the New Testament is contrasted with the Old, but a fuller discussion of it is to be found in the Letter to the Hebrews than anywhere else. Here (Heb.7:11; 7:19; 9:9; 10:1) we are to observe how the covenant of the law compares with the covenant of the gospel, the ministry of Christ with that of Moses."³³ (c) The Old Covenant was literal, whereas the New is spiritual. "I come to the third difference, taken from Jeremiah. This is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. From these words the apostle took occasion to make a comparison between the law and the gospel, calling the former literal, the latter spiritual doctrine; the former he speaks of as carved on tablets of stone, the latter as written upon men's hearts; the former is the preaching of death, the latter of life; the former of condemnation, the latter of righteousness; the former to be made void, the latter to abide (2Cor.3:6-11)."³⁴ (d) The Old Covenant was largely characterized by bondage, whereas the New by freedom. "The fourth difference arises out of the third. Scripture calls the Old Testament one of 'bondage' because it produces fear in men's minds; but the New Testament, one of 'freedom' because it lifts them to trust and assurance. So Paul states in the eighth chapter of Romans: 'You did not receive the spirit of slavery again unto fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship, through which we cry, 'Abba! Father!'' (Rom.8:15)."³⁵ (e) The Old Covenant had reference to one nation, the New to all nations. "The fifth difference, which may be added, lies in the fact that until the advent of Christ, the Lord set apart one nation within which to confine the covenant of His grace."³⁶ "The calling of the Gentiles, therefore, is a notable mark of the excellence of the New Testament over the Old."³⁷

(3) Book III (The Way in Which we Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from it, and What Effects Follow). This Book summarizes Calvin's view of the Spirit's work in the application of salvation: faith (chapters 1-2); repentance (chapters 3-5); the Christian life (chapters 6-10); justification by faith (chapters 11-18); Christian freedom (chapter 19); prayer (chapter 20); election (chapters 21-24); and the final resurrection (chapter 25). Calvin addresses the subject of prayer in chapter 20. It's the longest chapter in the entire *Institutes* (over 70 pages). After addressing the nature, necessity, and objections to prayer (and before he explains prayer in Christ's name and expounds the Lord's Prayer), Calvin provides "the rules of right prayer." (a) First Rule: reverence. "Now for framing prayer duly and properly, let this be the first rule: that we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversion with God. This we shall indeed attain with respect to the mind if it is freed from carnal cares and thoughts by which it can be called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God, and then not only devotes itself completely to prayer but also, in so far as this is possible, is lifted and carried beyond itself."³⁸ "Let us therefore realize that the only persons who duly and properly gird themselves to pray are those who are so moved by God's majesty that freed from earthly cares and affections they come to it. And the rite of raising the hands means that men remember they are far removed from God unless they raise their thoughts on high."³⁹ It's here Calvin discusses the help of the Spirit in prayer. "As we must turn keenness of mind toward God, so affection of heart must follow. To help us in this, God gives us the Spirit as our teacher and helper in prayer. This is not said in order that

³² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.3

³³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.4

³⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.7

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.9

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.11

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.12

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.4

³⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.5

we may give over the function of prayer to the Spirit of God, and vegetate in that carelessness to which we are all too prone. But rather our intention is that, loathing our apathy and dullness, we should seek such aid of the Spirit."⁴⁰

(b) Second Rule: a sincere sense of need. "Let this be the second rule: that in our petitions we ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest—nay, burning—desire to attain it." "The godly must beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they yearn for it with sincere affection of heart, and at the same time desire to obtain it from Him. Indeed, even though in those things which we seek only to God's glory we do not seem at first glance to be providing for our own need, yet it is fitting that they be sought with no less ardor and eagerness. When, for example, we pray that 'His name be sanctified', we should, so to speak, eagerly hunger and thirst after that sanctification."⁴¹ "If anyone should object that we are not always urged with equal necessity to pray, I admit it. Therefore common sense itself dictates that, because we are too lazy, God pricks us the more sharply, as occasion demands, to pray earnestly. David calls this a 'seasonable time' (Ps.32:6) because, the more harshly troubles, discomforts, fears, and trials of other sorts press us, the freer is our access to Him, as if God were summoning us to Himself."⁴²

(c) Third Rule: we yield all confidence in ourselves and humbly plead for pardon. "To this let me join a third rule: that anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory completely to God, abandon all thought of his own glory, cast off all notions of his own worth, in fine, put away all self-assurance—lest if we claim for ourselves anything, even the least bit, we should become vainly puffed up, and perish at His presence."⁴³ (d) Fourth Rule: we pray with confident hope. "The fourth rule is that, thus cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered. These are indeed things apparently contrary: to join the firm assurance of God's favor to a sense of His just vengeance; yet, on the ground that God's goodness alone raises up those oppressed by their own evil deeds, they very well agree together."⁴⁴ It's here the Calvin explains what it means to pray in the name of Jesus. "Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into His sight, the Heavenly Father Himself, to free us at once from shame and fear, has given us His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate and mediator with Him, by whose guidance we may confidently come to Him."⁴⁵

(4) Book IV (The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein). This Book summarizes Calvin's view of the church: the true church compared with the false (chapters 1-2); the government of the church (chapters 3-13); the sacraments (chapters 14-19); and civil government (chapter 20).

3. *Its historical importance.* In addition to French, the *Institutes* was translated into most European languages. "The *Institutes* was fortunate in securing translation almost at once into most of the languages of Europe" (Warfield).⁴⁶ "The *Institutes* of Calvin, is the most important work in the history of theological science, that which is more than any other creditable to its author, and has exerted directly or indirectly the greatest and most beneficial influence upon the opinions of intelligent men on theological subjects" (Cunningham).⁴⁷

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.5

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.6

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.7

⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.8

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.11

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.11

⁴⁶ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 5:409

⁴⁷ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 295