



# John Calvin's *Institutes in the Christian Religion* (1541)

A PPA Seminar: Fall 2017

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**Introduction and Overview of the “Institutes of the Christian Religion” (1541)**

***“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (ESV 2 Timothy 2:15)***

**Let us pray with Calvin:**

*“O Lord, you who are the fountain of all wisdom and learning...illumine my understanding, which of itself is blind, so that it may grasp the teaching that will be given to me; please strengthen my memory to be able to remember well, dispose my heart to receive what is taught willingly and with due eagerness, so that the opportunity you present to me may not be lost because of my ingratitude.*

*To do this, please pour out your Holy Spirit on me, the Spirit of all intelligence, truth, judgment, prudence, and teaching. Grant that I may direct my study to the true purpose, which is to know you in our Lord Jesus Christ, to have full confidence of salvation and life in your grace alone, and to serve you rightly and purely, according to your pleasure. Hear me, merciful Father, by our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”*

**Christian- “Simil Justus et Peccator”**

**Reformed**

**Pastor**

**Catholic**

**Pilgrim**

**Humanist Scholar- Theological Architect**

**Apostolic**

**Why did Calvin write the Institutes? Teaching, Defense, and Encouragement**

- **Pastoral:** Teaching Christians the Bible / Persecuted Christians / Training Ministers
- **Apologetic/Polemical:** Civil authorities / Roman Catholics (“Sophists” or “Sobonnists” or “Schoolmen”, “Papists” or “Popish” or “Romish”) / Libertines (“Radical Reformers”) / Nicodemites / Lutherans (Lord’s Supper)

## Quotation in preface to King Francis I (1494-1547):

*“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 my 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...”*

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*“...Observing that certain wicked men had stirred up such fury in your kingdom that no place remained for wholesome doctrine, I thought it worthwhile to use the present book both for the instruction of those I had originally meant to teach, and as a confession of faith for yourself, so that you might know what this teaching is which so inflames the rage of those who today, by fire and sword, are troubling your kingdom. For I am not at all ashamed to say that here I have included almost the full sum of that very teaching which they [Roman Catholics] believe should be punished by prison, exile, banishment and fire, and which they shout should be driven from both land and sea.*

*...It is thus with good reason, most illustrious King, that I ask you to acquaint yourself thoroughly with this case, which up till now has been handled in a muddled way, with no respect for legal process, and with reckless zeal rather than with judicial calm and gravity... God’s poor little church has been either devoured by cruel deaths, driven into exile, or so overawed by threats and terrors that it dares not utter a word...In the meantime no one steps forward to offer a defense against their furious assaults” (Prefatory Address to King Francis, ‘Institutes of the Christian Religion’).*

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## **Eyewitness to Persecution in Calvin’s Time**

*“I saw two [evangelicals/reformed believers] burned there [in Paris, France]. Their death inspired in me differing sentiments. If you had been there, you would have hoped for a less severe punishment for these poor unfortunates....The first was a very young man, not yet with a beard...he was the son of a cobbler. He was brought in front of the judges and condemned to have his tongue cut out and burned straight afterward. Without changing the expression of his face, the young man presented his tongue to the executioner’s knife, sticking it out as far as he could.*

*The executioner pulled it out even further with pincers, cut it off, and hit the sufferer several times on the tongue and threw it in the young man’s face. Then he was put into a tipcart, which was driven to the place of execution, but, to see him, one would think that he was going to a feast....When the chain had been placed around his body, I could not describe to you with what equanimity of soul and with what expression in his features he endured the cries of elation and the insults of the crowd that were directed towards him. He did not make a sound, but from time to time he spat out the blood that was filling his mouth, and he lifted his eyes to heaven, as if he was waiting some miraculous rescue.*

*When his head was covered in sulphur, the executioner showed him the fire with a menacing air; but the young man, without being scared, let it be known, by a movement of his body, that he was giving himself willingly to be burned” (Testimony of a German Roman Catholic student named Eustache Knobelsdorf in 1542).*

## What does the full title of the Institutes teach you about the purpose of the book?

*Christianae Religionis Institutio: The Basic Teaching of the Christian Religion comprising almost the whole sum of godliness (piety) and whatever it is necessary to know on the doctrine of salvation (gospel). A newly published work very well worth reading by all who are studious of godliness (piety). A Preface to the most Christian King of France, offering to him this book as a confession of faith by the author, Jean Calvin of Noyon.*

- Basic Teaching
- Piety
- Gospel
- Confession of Faith

## The Growth of a Book, the Maturation of an Author

“The ‘Institutes’ had drifted into the market as a sailboat, but by 1559 it had grown into a cargo ship, increasing from six to eighty chapters.” (Selderhuis).

- Confession of Faith (1536): 1) Law; 2) Apostle’s Creed; 3) Lord’s Prayer; 4) Sacraments; 5) Five False Sacraments of the Idolatrous Romish False Religion; 6) Christian Liberty
- Basic Manual on Biblical and Pastoral Theology (1541)
- *A Magnum Opus* of Theology (1559)

## Topics and Layout of the Institutes (1541)

- **Preface to King Francis I:** “True Christians, True Church”
- **The Knowledge of God:** “Covenant revealed knowledge of God as He is toward us”  
*Calvin: “All the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.”*
- **The Knowledge of Man and Free Will:** “Covenant-image-bearer, but fallen through covenant breaking, and thus no longer free, but enslaved to sin”

*Calvin: “Man, having been created in God’s image, was endowed with gifts and superior powers which testified to His Creator’s extraordinary generosity toward him... Through his ingratitude, he quickly made himself unworthy of all the benefits which God had given him. The heavenly image he bore therefore erased; being estranged from God by sin he was likewise deprived of his share in the blessings which can only be had in Him.”*

- **The Law:** “An enchanted mirror that reveals holy, just, good, and all-wise God, the reason for man’s existence, and the perfect, righteous, good man”

Calvin: “The Law reveals our need of God’s mercy ... The Law is a standard of perfect righteousness.”

- **Faith, with an Explanation of the Apostle’s Creed:** “Faith that is given by God that is not perfect, but rests entirely upon God’s truth with confidence and assurance”

Calvin: *A firm and certain knowledge of God’s goodwill to us which, being founded on the free promise given in Jesus Christ, is revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”*

- **Repentance:** “The Christian Life”

Calvin: *“The essence of repentance is that, taking leave of ourselves, we turn to God, and forsaking our former thoughts and intentions we adopt new ones ... It is a turning of our life to follow God and the path which He shows us, a turning produced by a genuine and unfeigned fear of God, and consisting in mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in vivification of the Spirit.”*

- **Justification by Faith and the Merits of Works:** “Declared righteous based on the merit of Christ’s works, all of our works in Him accepted as His sons when brought in sincerity”

Calvin: *“It teaches us to look away from our works and to look only to God’s mercy and to the perfect holiness of Christ .... A man is righteous not in himself but because Christ’s righteousness is made over to him by imputation.”*

- **The Similarity and Difference between the Old and New Testaments:** “One God, One People, One Story”

Calvin: *“The covenant made with the fathers of old, in its substance and reality, is so similar to ours that it can be said to be the very same. It differs only in the way it is dispensed.”*

- **The Predestination and Providence of God:** “True believers will never lose their faith; true believers will never lose their way”

Calvin: *“We can predestination God’s eternal counsel by which He has determined what He wishes to do with each and every person ... Thus, according to the end for which a person has been created, we say that he is predestined to*

*death or life ... Providence is what we call the order which God observes in governing the world and in directing all things.”*

- **Prayer, with an Explanation of Our Lord’s Prayer:** “Faith makes itself known from one’s heart in communion and union with God”

*Calvin: “We are taught by faith to know that all the goodness which we need and which we ourselves lack is in God and in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father has placed all the bounty of His blessing and grace, so that we may all draw from Him as from a most plentiful spring. It...remains for us to seek from Him what we know to be in Him, and to ask Him for it in prayer and supplication.”*

- **The Sacraments:** “Visible words of promises that bring the very presence of Christ and His grace, received by faith, sealed by the Holy Spirit”

*Calvin: “It is an outward sign by which our Lord represents and testifies His goodwill toward us, in order to sustain and strengthen the weakness of our faith.”*

- **Baptism:** “Outward sign of an inward reality of regeneration and cleansing from sin authenticated by the Holy Spirit”

*Calvin: “In the Gospel our washing and sanctification are proclaimed to us, and that by baptism this proclamation and message are signed and sealed.”*

- **The Lord’s Supper:** Outward sign of an inward reality of growth in faith and sanctification in Christ, authenticated by the Holy Spirit”

*Calvin: “We call it the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, because in it we are spiritually fed and nourished by the goodness of our Lord, and we in turn give Him thanks for His kindness.”*

- **The Five Ceremonies Falsely Called Sacraments: Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction, Ecclesiastical Orders, and Marriage:** “Primary tenants of ‘Romanism’/False Medieval Roman Catholic Religion of Idolatry”

*Calvin: “...Belief in the seven sacraments has been so common among men and so widely discussed in debates and sermons, that from very early times it has been rooted in men’s hearts and is still embedded there. I thus thought it worthwhile to consider separately and more closely the remaining five, which are generally counted among the Lord’s sacraments, and having revealed their complete falsity, to show the untutored what they are like and how, up until now, they have been wrongly taken for sacraments.”*

- **Christian Freedom:** “Free to live as one was created to live under the authority of God and His Word, enjoying peace of conscience”

Calvin: “*Freedom from bondage to the law in Christ ... Freedom to obey without constraint God’s will ... Freedom in the use of indifferent things.*”

- **The Power of the Church:** “Possessing the keys to the kingdom of God (special grace), given graciously by grace by Christ, to be administered as steward-servants under the authority of God’s special revelation in His Word”

Calvin: “*Power is conferred solely by God’s Word. Those who rightly use such power look on themselves simply as Christ’s servants and as stewards of the mysteries of God.*”

- **Civil Government:** “Possessing the sword of the kingdom of God (common grace), given graciously by Christ, to be administered as steward-servants under the authority of God’s general revelation in His creation and in conscience”

Calvin: “*Magistrates are God’s servants/ministers ... They must remember that they are deputies of God, they must make every effort and take every care in all they do to represent to men an image of God’s providence, protection, goodness, mildness and justice.*”

- **The Christian Life:** “Lifelong learning that we are not our own, we are God’s, and we are therefore to learn to be like Christ in our love to God and neighbor, specifically in our self-denial in our cross-bearing pilgrimage, stewardship, and meditation upon the future life.

Calvin: “*Scripture teaches that holiness is the purpose of our calling, which we must constantly keep in view if we would truly respond to God ... A golden rule: we are not our own ... Let us therefore forget ourselves as much as we can—ourselves and everything around us.*”

### **Calvin’s Institutes (1559 edition)**

“*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 that end he ought to relate its contents.*” – Calvin’s preface of the 1559 ‘Institutes’

**Book I: God the Creator (Father/Author of Salvation)- “I believe in God the Father Almighty...”**

**Book II: God the Redeemer (Son of God/ Accomplishment of Salvation)-  
“...And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...”**

**Book III: God the Spirit (Spirit/ Application of Salvation)- “...I believe in the Holy Spirit...”**

**Book IV: God the King of Church and the World- “I believe in the one, holy, apostolic, catholic church...”**

### **Interpreting Calvin’s Methodology in ‘Institutes’**

- 1) Antitheses: True knowledge vs. False knowledge
- 2) Distinctions, not separations: Christ’s human/divine natures; Old/New covenants; justification/sanctification; salvation/works, etc.
- 3) Polar Extremes: A) Ignorance ← → Excessive Curiosity; B) Romish False Religion ← → Anabaptists (Libertines).

### **Characteristics of the Institutes**

*“Biblical, Systematic, Polemical, Pastoral and Devotional”*

**Biblical**: Learning between two primary errors: Ignorance on the one side and extreme curiosity on the other. “Speak where the Scripture speaks, and be silent where it is silent. ‘Institutes’ meant to be a guide and theological handbook to studying the Bible.

**Systematic**: A systematic God-centered world and life view drawn completely from Holy Scripture and from the writings of the fathers of the faith who also drew from the well of Scripture. ‘Institutes’ described as thoroughly logical and consistent, and gives the mind an organized way of thinking about God and His ways. This can lead to faithful meditation on Scripture. His system was to be consistently Scriptural, and to achieve maximum clarity of presentation (McGrath).

**Polemical**: Calvin sought to pastorally inform, but also to warn against and defend the truth against heresy and schismatics. Calvin’s primary antagonists and “conversation partners” were Roman Catholics, Anabaptists (“Radical Reformers”), Lutherans, and Nicodemites. The ‘Institutes’ has been described as a ‘Book of Antitheses’. As Warfield taught however, Calvin’s aim was primarily constructive, not destructive; Calvin was seeking to rebuild the church after mean years of theological error.

**Pastoral**: Calvin writes with hungry souls in mind. Calvin was passing on to others what he knew and had experienced about God himself. “[Calvin’s double purpose in writing the ‘Institutes’] seeks to witness to the revelation of God in scripture, and it seeks to do so in language capable of moving hearts, minds, and wills of its audience toward an ever-deepening life of faith” (Serene Jones). Calvin sought brevity and clarity against the Medieval Scholastics whom he described their method as “so twisted, involved, tortuous, and puzzling...a kind of species of secret magic”.

**Devotional**: Warfield wrote: “It is not the head but the heart which made [Calvin] a theologian and it is not the head but the heart which he primarily addresses in his theology...” Calvin’s theology was with an aim to glorify the triune God, through loving Him with our hearts, minds, souls, strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Piety or godliness was Calvin’s goal in writing the ‘Institutes’. Elsie McKee summarizes Calvin’s devotional goal:

“...Intensely personal but never individualistic. Woven through with the great doctrines of justification by faith and regeneration of life, the glory of God and providence. Undergirded with prayer, proclaimed in word and shared in sacraments, sung in psalms. Embodied in action and demanding respect for the neighbor and solidarity with those who suffer in spirit, mind, or body. Not an easy or comfortable piety; it asks for one’s all. Sturdy and down to earth, lived in the mundane context of daily work, yet always conscious of the presence of the transcendent God and the high calling of living before God. An energizing, lifelong response to God’s liberating claim, God’s righteous mercy, God’s compelling love, a belonging that is all our joy. ‘We are not our own... We are God’s!’”

**Casper Olevianus’ summary of Calvin’s ‘Institutes’:**

*“Man being at first created upright, but afterwards being not partially but totally ruined, finds his entire salvation out of himself in Christ, to whom being united by the Holy Spirit freely given, without any foresight of future works, he thereby obtains a double blessing—namely, full imputation of righteousness, which goes along with us even to the grave, and the commencement of sanctification, which daily advances till at length it is perfected in the day of regeneration or resurrection of the body, and this, in order that the great mercy of God may be celebrated in the heavenly mansions throughout eternity.”*

**Let us pray with Calvin:**

*Almighty God, since you have deigned in your mercy to gather us to your church, and to enclose us within the boundaries of your word, by which you preserve us in the true and right worship of your majesty, O grant that we may continue contented in this obedience to you. And though Satan may, in many ways, attempt to draw us here and there, and we be also ourselves inclined to evil, O grant that being confirmed in faith and united to you by that sacred bond, we may constantly abide under the restraining of your word.*



*May we cleave to Christ, your only begotten Son, who has joined us forever to Himself. May we never by any means turn aside from you, but be, on the contrary, confirmed in the faith of His gospel, until at length He will receive us all into His kingdom. Amen.*