

Structure and Organization of Calvin's Institutes, I

I heard a story recently about a young man who was being examined in theology for his licensure. The examiner, one of the pastors in the presbytery, began to question this way: "Was Calvin right when..." At that point, the young man said, "Yes!" He did not give the pastor a chance to finish his sentence. Everybody laughed.

I want to go back to the introductory pages and say a little about the rest of that material. Then we will move on to what we have before us today.

In the previous lesson we looked at general characteristics of the *Institutes*: biblical, theological, rhetorical, and devotional. The word "devotional" probably surprises you (and people in general) because people do not think of Calvin's *Institutes* as a devotional book. However, as you get into it, you will see that is certainly one of the words we can use to describe it. The title of the 1536 edition was *The Institutes of the Christian Religion Containing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety* (notice Calvin's word there) *and Whatever it is Necessary to Know in the Doctrine of Salvation*. Even though that title is not retained in the later editions, the *Institutes* continues to emphasize the devotional aspect—the matter of piety. It is not enough just to talk about these things. We must really find them in our lives, so it is a challenging book, not only intellectually, but personally as well.

As you read through the *Institutes*, you will find many times that you stop and ponder what Calvin is saying and pray and ask God to make these things real in your own life. Calvin's life-long motto was "My heart I offer you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely." Most sixteenth-century writers had mottos, and this was the one that Calvin chose for himself. For Calvin, it was not just a matter of pious words because, as we look at his life, we see many times when he would have chosen some other course but he said, "But I am not my own. I remember that I am not my own and that I have offered my heart to the Lord. Then I can do nothing else but what I feel He would have me to do." One of the older biographies of John Calvin is called *The Man God Mastered* by Jean Cadier. That is indeed a proper title for the life of Calvin. Calvin was not perfect by any means. He had his shortcomings and failings. He could be somewhat short-tempered, critical, and even harsh at times with friends as well as enemies. But, under it all, there was a deep love for God and concern for His glory.

We will come later to the section in the *Institutes* called "The Life of the Christian" as we come to Calvin's treatment of sanctification. There you will see Calvin spelling out in a kind of biblical, theological treatise what the Christian life should look like. Calvin not only wrote about that, but he also certainly attempted to exhibit it in his own life. Later in this lesson we will see that when Calvin is talking about knowledge of God, piety is requisite of the knowledge of God. Calvin cannot concede that a person can really know God in any sort of cold, intellectual way. Piety is part of the definition of knowledge. It is not something else. You should have knowledge of God, and then you should be a spiritual person. But, to have knowledge of God is to be a spiritual person. So, piety is requisite for the knowledge of God.

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."

We do not know that Francis ever read that material. If he did, it did not seem to help him much. Nonetheless, Calvin wanted to say that Protestants are not strange extremists nor are they going to endanger the country of France. They are Bible-believing, law-abiding people. 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.

According to Warfield, Calvin added, developed, and defined. We compare the first edition of 1536 to the last edition of 1559. We, of course, are reading the 1559 edition. The 1536 edition is translated and in print. Dr. Ford Lewis Battles did a translation in the 1536 edition as well. You can read that and compare Calvin's first statement with his last statement.

Warfield is right in saying that Calvin added, developed, and defined. He did not really change his ideas or theology. Calvin did not have to write a book entitled *How My Mind has Changed*. Augustine did do that. He wrote his retractions at the end of his life as he looked back over all of his writing and tried to judge which ideas were good and which were not so good. He thought about how his ideas changed from time to time in his life. Calvin did not have to write a retraction because he did not change. It was not because Calvin was stubborn or proud and just did not want to change. His theology, amazingly enough, was intact in that first statement of 1536. He developed, defined, and illustrated it, but he did not change it. As he added, developed, and defined, he was growing in knowledge.

Calvin's advancement in knowledge certainly shows in the later editions of the *Institutes*. He was writing Bible commentaries, so his Bible knowledge deepened, and that is seen in his use of Scripture in the *Institutes*. He continued to study the church fathers. More and more we see quotations from the church fathers in the *Institutes*. He loved Augustine, of course. Augustine was *the* church father for Calvin. At one point, he exalted Augustine as "totally ours"—that is, belonging to the Reformed side as over against the Catholic side. That may have been an overstatement, but Calvin was enthusiastic about Augustine. He also often used Chrysostom, the Greek church father, although he recognized that Chrysostom was not nearly as astute in theology as Augustine. However, Chrysostom was a great exegete, a great expositor of Scripture. He used Cyprian, Ambrose, Gregory, and Bernard of Clairvaux. These were his favorites. Then, Calvin interacted with contemporary Protestants such as Luther (somewhat indirectly), Melancthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Bucer. All of this study did bear fruit. We see the results of it in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*.

The other large area that enabled Calvin to expand, define, and perfect the *Institutes* was his own experience. He was first in Geneva for a short time with William Farel. Later, he served as a pastor in Strasburg for three years with Martin Bucer. Then, he was back in Geneva for the rest of his life. So, his pastoral ministry helped him to expand his theological treatise. Around the time that he published the *Institutes*, he traveled back into France some and down into Italy. He moved around quite a bit during that period.

The other factor that enabled Calvin to develop and lengthen his *Institutes* was his theological controversy. Calvin had many, many theological battles. By 1559, we can see the results of these coming out in the *Institutes*. He had controversies on the doctrine of the Trinity, the Old Testament, and the Lord's Supper. All of these controversies impacted the *Institutes*. Through all of these years, Calvin was adding, developing, defining, and rearranging. If Calvin did not change his mind as to the content, he made a lot of changes as to the order. In fact, he tells us that he was not really happy with the order in which he placed things until the final edition of 1559. Calvin was very concerned about this. As you read through the *Institutes*, be alert of these methodological statements in which Calvin tells us what he is doing. He was very concerned not only to get the doctrine right but also to put it in the right place.

That is something important that we can learn from Calvin. Calvin was concerned with epistemology—how people are taught and how they learn. He said that it is important to say the right thing, but it is also important to say it at the right time. Dr. Battles created a chart in which you can see the reordering or the shifting of material that took place during that time particularly between 1550 and 1559. Even though it can be overwhelming when you first look at it, the chart illustrates the point very well that Calvin was concerned with his arrangement: what comes first and what comes next. As we come into some of these doctrines, we will see that one thing that got moved around quite a bit is the doctrine of election. When do you tell people about election? Calvin does something rather surprising with that doctrine that we will get to later.

Let me say just a few words about English translations. The first was Thomas Norton back in the sixteenth century. Calvin was very fortunate with his first English translator. Norton did an exceptionally good job. Very soon after the completion of the *Institutes* in 1559, which was written in Latin, it was translated by Calvin into French and then quite soon into English. John Allen was the second translator. John Allen and Henry Beveridge were both nineteenth-century translators. The Beveridge translation is still in print. It was until fairly recently anyway. Those are not bad but not very good either. Ford Lewis Battles' 1960 translation is the one that we are using. Even though it has been criticized some, it is by far the most superior translation that we have at present.

The four titles of Calvin's books are his titles. The chapter titles are his as well. It is very important to know the titles of these four books. Learn and memorize them just the way Calvin wrote them because he was very concerned with the titles. Two of the titles are "Knowledge of God the Creator" and "Knowledge of God the Redeemer." These are shortened forms of the fuller titles that Calvin gave. You can see how the four books break down into treatments of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church.