

Introducing the Institutes

The title of Calvin's book is *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. We are so used to talking about Calvin's *Institutes* that it sounds right to us, but if you stop and think for a moment, it does sound like a strange name for a book—*Institutes*. The singular, Latin form of the word, *Intitutio*, was used in the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*. It was the first edition. We will talk about these different editions. The translation has almost always been plural and English. So rather than calling it "Institute of the Christian Religion," we call it *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 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.

Let us talk about the importance of the *Institutes*. I am teaching a Sunday school class at my church. I started this Sunday school class a couple of weeks ago. These are lay people studying the *Institutes*. They are using a nice abridged edition that Donald McKim has come out with. It does not get everything in, of course, but it does include the major material of the *Institutes*. I began the class two weeks ago on a very cold morning with this question: why would anybody want to get up and be at church at 8:00 in the morning to study a book written in Latin 500 years ago? That is what they were doing, and that is what you are doing as well, in a sense. So, I have to give an answer to that question.

I have two thoughts as an answer to that question. These are two quotations on the importance of the *Institutes*. The first is from John T. McNeil, who is the editor of our version of the *Institutes*. McNeil says, "Calvin's book holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected the course of history." That is true, and I think you can make a case for that. Then one reason to study Calvin's *Institutes* is because you are studying one of the most important books in history. There are not many books like this. So, to be an educated person, to know something about history, and to be able to talk about one of the most important books that have affected the course of history, we need to read the book. That is one answer explaining why it is worthwhile to do this.

The second reason comes from a quotation from Steven Osment, an historian at Harvard University. He says, "It is the Reformation's most eloquent, theological statement." So, not only has it affected the course of history, but it is also the most eloquent, most important, most complete statement of theology from the sixteenth century, the century of the Reformation. It is not the only theology from the sixteenth century, but Steven Osment says it is the most eloquent, and I would add that it is the most important.

Luther, as you know, did not write a systematic theology. Luther wrote a lot, but Luther's writings were never organized systematically. His colleague and young friend, Philip Melancthon, did write systematic theology. It is called the *Loci Communes*, which is a medieval Latin term that was often used for books like that. We would translate it as "Common Places." Melancthon wrote that in 1521, which was 15 years before the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin was not even a Protestant in 1521. In fact, he was just a little boy in 1521. He was born in 1509, so he was part of the next generation of Reformers.

Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* is a significant work. It summarizes and embodies Luther's theological thinking. Luther loved it. He said it should be included in the canon. (Luther was kind of weak on canonicity.) He said, "Maybe it should not be in the canon, but if it is not Saint Paul, it is next to Saint Paul." That was because Melanchthon was putting forth Luther's theology in the *Loci Communes*. Compared to Calvin's *Institutes*, Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* is so far inferior. It is not well organized, and it does not really have the power of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Zwingli did not write a systematic theology. He did write a commentary on true and false religion, but it does not have the breadth of Calvin's work. It came out in 1525. The closest thing that we have to a systematic theology on the Reformed side that would parallel Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* is the *Somayer* (The Summary of Theology) written by Calvin's friend, William Farel, which also came out in 1525. Farel was a lay preacher and a dynamic Christian evangelist. He was sometimes called a "hot gospeler." He was not gifted with Calvin's gifts. Yesterday in chapel, Dr. Chapell, the president of Covenant Seminary, was talking about different gifts in the church and how we rejoice in that. We rejoice in Farel's ability, but we also rejoice in Calvin's ability (and Farel did that). Later, when Calvin's *Institutes* came out, Farel wrote his friends and said, "Do not read my book anymore. Read Calvin's. This is a book you need to read." Farel could get things done. He planted a church and stirred up people. However, Calvin had to come alongside him and provide the organization, stability, and theology that we see in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Let us go on to the general characteristics of the *Institutes*. I have some words to summarize the *Institutes*. It is biblical, and you can see the priority of Scripture throughout it. As you read and study this book, you will see that the Bible is at the forefront. In fact, the other day in Sunday school, I was lecturing on the knowledge of God in Calvin, and one of the women said, "This sounds like the book of Romans to me." And I said, "Well, that is what it is." Calvin based his thinking on Scripture. As Dr. Battles says, "Calvin is a scriptural theologian first and a user of philosophy, logic, rhetoric, and all human tools of organization only second."

Sometimes people get the idea that this is a very logical, ironclad system—that everything is forced into a logical framework. However, that idea really misunderstands what Calvin is doing. He is really attempting to use Scripture to set forth a theology that would be organized and systematic but basically scriptural. His use of Scripture is astounding. There are almost 7000 references to Scripture in the *Institutes*. In the back of Volume II, there is a biblical references index. So, you might note that there are a number of indices that help us in various ways. If you thumb through it, you will see those 7000 references in the *Institutes*. In our introduction, John T. McNeil says that Calvin's readiness in bringing Scripture passages to bear upon each point of argument is astounding and has perhaps never been surpassed. I have a quote from one of my favorite writers on Calvin—the old southern Presbyterian theologian R. C. Reed. Reed taught at the old Columbia Seminary in South Carolina. He wrote a book called *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*. Dr. Reed said, "Calvin was a wholesale plagiarist from Moses and David, Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jesus and John, Peter and Paul." Calvin's plagiarism came from all of Scripture.

It is amazing how adept he was in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, in the prophets as well as the poetical books, and in the epistles as well as the Gospels. He has a working canon, which is as big as the Bible itself. Most of us tend to feel more at home in one part of the Bible. We may preach more on certain sections of the Bible. We do not have the breadth of Calvin in being able to handle well the entire Bible. So, Calvin was concerned with the priority of Scripture, the use of Scripture, and the exegesis of Scripture.

Sometimes I have read books on theology or on something in which the writer will make a point and then have about 15 Bible quotations in parentheses at the end of the sentence. After a while, I get the feeling that the author is just trying to impress somebody. I do not get that feeling with Calvin. When Calvin uses a Scripture text, he uses it appropriately, and he uses it well. He is not just building up a lot of texts in order to cause people to think that he is being biblical in his teaching. We not only need to add text, but we also need to know what those texts say, and we need to be able to exegete them appropriately as well. That is what Calvin does. The Scripture texts are not decorative. They are for a real purpose.

Warfield says that Calvin was the creator of a genuine exegesis. For that reason, his commentaries are valuable even today. If you read commentaries from medieval theologians and even some from the Reformation era, you will find them stilted, old-fashioned, and not very useful. However, that is not true of Calvin.

Some people think that Calvin became such a masterful exegete of the texts of Scripture because after he completed his study at the Sorbonne, which resulted in a degree in the liberal arts, he then studied law in two universities in France—at Orleans and Bourges. The study of law, at this time, was more advanced in terms of understanding and setting forth the true meaning of the text than was the study of theology. So Calvin learned from his law professors to approach a text directly, to interpret it within the linguistic and historical parameters of its context, and to apply it. That is what we need to do with Scripture, and that is what Calvin did with Scripture. One of the most recent biographies of Calvin by the French historian, Cottret, says, “Calvin had a French passion for clarity reinforced by his legal education.” I do not know about French passion for clarity, but Cottret says that the French have it, so I will accept that. We can thank God for that legal education in Calvin’s life because it prepared him for the kind of work that he did with the text of Scripture.

Calvin does not always get textural criticism right because he is sixteenth century and we are twenty-first century. Textural criticism has advanced considerably since Calvin’s time. But, for his time, he was a pretty able textural critic. He knew the good manuscripts from the not-so-good manuscripts. He was able to argue which word was the best in a particular text or sentence. We almost always (if not always) trust him. I feel fairly certain that Calvin is going to come out on the right side of an issue of textural criticism.

I want to also say a word about Calvin’s commentaries. I have already said that they are valuable and useful to us today. Calvin wrote the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536. He wrote it with the purpose to have it mainly serve as an introduction to his biblical commentaries. So, in one sense, he felt that his life work would be to write commentaries on all of the books of the Bible. He did not complete that work. He did not do some of the smaller New Testament books, nor did he complete several Old Testament books. He was writing on Ezekiel when he died. I think he got to chapter 22. He was very, very ill. He was only 55, but he was very ill most of his life.

Calvin suffered from all kinds of physical problems. To read his letters to his doctors is a hair-raising experience. Calvin described his symptoms in painful detail and, of course, doctors in those days did not know what to do about almost anything. Calvin was dying and suffering greatly. He had his friends help him sit up in his bed, and he carried on with his Ezekiel commentary. Some of those friends thought that he was overdoing it and said, “You need to rest.” Calvin’s reply was, “What? Would you have the Lord come and find me idle?” Well, maybe Calvin should have rested. He was a workaholic; although, it is inspiring to think of Calvin writing to the very end. In fact, an unfinished sentence in that Ezekiel commentary marked almost the last day of Calvin’s life. Commentaries were important to him.

Calvin's goal in all of his commentaries was comprehensive brevity. When you look at the whole shelf full of Calvin's commentaries, you wonder about the brevity. But, the Bible is a big book. When you start reading those commentaries, you realize that Calvin was successful in what he did. In fact, if you compare his work to others, you see that point made. Calvin's commentary on Genesis is one volume. Admittedly, it is a very large volume, but Luther wrote eight volumes on Genesis. Calvin has a single commentary on Romans. His friend, Martin Bucer, wrote four volumes on Romans. When Calvin was writing his commentary on Romans, he introduced it by saying, "Bucer is too long to be read in haste and too high to be easily understood by the low and those who do not consider things too closely." So, Bucer is fine—if you have a lot of time and if you are smart. But, Calvin said, "My commentary is briefer, and you can read it more quickly. And if you are not the kind of person who can follow things too closely, you are better off with me." Calvin often made the point that it is good to be brief. Do not go on too long about things. A few years ago, one of my students made a bookmark for me with a quotation from Calvin's *Institutes* that says, "By nature, I love brevity." Well, that is interesting, but when you discover that the quote is found on page 685 of the *Institutes*, you begin to wonder about the brevity of Calvin. I keep that bookmark to remind me that Calvin thought he was being brief.

Another word I would use to describe the *Institutes* is "theological." Allison McGrath talks about the *Institutes* as highly systemized and structured theology. So we really have to add the word "theological" to the word "biblical." Calvin wanted to produce an orderly arrangement of biblical themes. He struggled with that. How do you put together the message of the Bible? In fact, Calvin began in 1536 with his first edition. Then, he went through various revisions but did not find himself satisfied until 1559. He said, "At last, I figured it out!"—as to how to arrange the material. It was not that the ideas were changing or the theology was changing, but the arrangement was changing.

Some people have spent a lot of time trying to discern if Calvin had a central theme. Some have suggested the sovereignty of God or the decrees of God. Others have suggested Christ or union with Christ or something else as the central theme of the *Institutes*. However, I think Calvin scholars now agree that we do not have to look for a central theme. Calvin did not have one central theme that he was putting forth. It was not even the covenant, as important as it was to Calvin. We will get into that later. Was he a covenant theologian or not? He did not take one idea and say, "This is how I am going to structure theology." He actually started by saying, "Almost all of our wisdom is composed of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves." That is not exactly a central theme, but that is the kind of overarching theme that Calvin set out to do in the *Institutes*.

Dr. Dowey, in one of his books on Calvin—*Knowledge of God and the Theology of Calvin*—talks about clarity of individual themes and the incomprehensibility of their interrelations. I think that captures pretty well what we find here. Calvin was very concerned to be very clear about themes of the Bible, but he was not concerned to always explain how these themes can interrelate. In fact, sometimes he just stopped and said he could not go any further because he thought the Bible did not go any further. In those moments, I say he sang the doxology. He praised God for the wisdom of God. His judgments are past finding out because he really did not force all of these themes together. He was very clear and comprehensive in developing the themes, but he allowed them to stand side-by-side even if he could not totally reconcile, for example, human responsibility and divine sovereignty.

Another point that I would like to make about the word "theological" is what Battles calls "antithetical structuring." By that, Battles means that as Calvin deals with different topics, he would say, "This is what the Bible teaches. This is what we should believe." Then, he would oppose that with, "This is what we should not believe. This is wrong. This is false." So, there is antithetical structuring in the *Institutes* that Battles deals with in some detail in his analysis. In other words, Calvin would contrast the truth, as

he saw it, with Roman Catholic teaching or Anabaptist teaching or with Osiander or with somebody else. That means that the *Institutes* is a polemical document. Even though that is true, we also find Calvin saying something like this: "It ought to be enough simply to state the truth and move onto something else." That is what Calvin loved to do, but he said, "Because of false teaching, we cannot do that." So, he found himself required to not only state the truth but to also attack false teaching. Calvin is polemical, but he did not rejoice in polemics. He did not enjoy it as much as he enjoyed setting forth the truth positively. He believed that in order to be faithful, Christians had to say not only "This is right" but also "This is wrong." Yesterday, I was reading a sermon by Dr. Gresham Machem on Paul in Galatians. It was called "The Man Who Could Say No." Paul was the man who could say, "No, something is wrong in Galatia." So we need to say yes, but sadly we also sometimes need to say no, and we get that in the *Institutes*.

Another word to describe Calvin's *Institutes* is "restraint." Calvin did not answer all of the questions. Sometimes people who think the *Institutes* is a book of great theological logic are disappointed when they actually begin to read it because things they thought would be answered are not answered. Warfield said, "Whither the Bible took him, thither he went. Where scriptural declarations failed him, there he stopped short." Perhaps the best place to find Calvin expressing this in his own words is in Book III, chapter 21, part 4 where he said, "We should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden." There are some things we do not know about because God has not chosen to tell us about them. So, we should not pry into those things. But, we should not neglect what He has brought into the open. We need to go as far a Scripture goes and then stop. Calvin wanted to avoid excessive ingratitude—that is, we can be ungrateful if we do not go as far as the Bible goes. He wanted to go as far as the Bible goes. Calvin did not necessarily think he had the last word on this. He would, at times, urge his readers to go further in their understanding of the Bible than he went. When he talked about the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, he said, "I urge my readers not to confine their mental interests within these too-narrow limits..." Now, after we read Calvin for 100 pages of the Lord's Supper, we wonder if anything else could have possibly been said about it. But, he said, "Do not confine yourself within these too-narrow limits, but strive to rise much higher than I can lead you." His goal was not to say, "Here it is—this is the last word," but "This is the best I could do, and if you can go further in the Scripture then you must go further." So, avoid excessive ingratitude. We do not use what we have so we cannot be grateful to God for it.

Also, avoid excessive curiosity. Calvin hated curiosity. Somewhere, we will see him bring up that famous story from Augustine. When a student asked an old man what God was doing before He created the heavens and the earth, the old man said, "He was making hell for the curious." Augustine really did not like that answer, but Calvin was sympathetic toward that answer. He did not really like theological curiosity. He said, "That is to get into a labyrinth, a maze." You get into these questions that are just curious questions that we do not have any way of answering, and you get into this maze. You get lost in there. So, avoid excessive curiosity. The labyrinth, for him, was a picture of human attempts to search out God beyond the Word. Calvin advocated what he called "a learned ignorance." Notice both words: learned ignorance. It was not an ignorant ignorance but a learned ignorance. It is where we come out after we have done everything that we can. I am sometimes rather astounded to think that we give students a degree that says, "Master of Divinity." I think, "*Master of Divinity?*" Maybe we should change it to M.L.I.—Master of Learned Ignorance. That would be more in keeping with Calvin's thought. Calvin did not answer all the questions. He takes us as far as he can and then he stops in wonder before the mystery. There are examples of that in Book I, chapter 5, section 9 related to the doctrine of God, in Book III, chapter 21, section 1 related to the doctrine of election, in Book IV, chapter 17, section 7 related to the Lord's Supper, and many other places where Calvin said, "This is as far as I can go. What we need to do now is worship and not answer questions that we cannot answer."

Calvin's theological treatment is orderly, it is antithetical, it shows proper restraint, and it also illustrates the principle of accommodation. Accommodation is an idea that appeared before Calvin, but Calvin picked up on it and used it. It is the concept that God accommodates Himself in His Word to the level of our understanding. He goes back as far as origin and suggests that God faced much the same problem in addressing sinful humanity as a human father or human mother would face in trying to communicate to a small child. It is a challenge. My daughter, son-in-law, and their one-year-old baby, Ian, visited us last weekend. They live in Chicago. We had Ian's birthday here. It was fascinating to see John and Isabel trying to communicate to Ian, who is just one year old, things that he should not do. Trying to get through to him was not easy. So, God is communicating to us, and He accommodates Himself to human capacity. If you want an article on that, Dr. Battles wrote one called "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity: Discussing this Point in John Calvin."

Many examples in the *Institutes* have given some references in which God accommodates Himself or, as we will see when we come to Calvin's doctrine of Scripture, God lisps when He speaks to us. We could translate that by saying, "God talks baby talk." The Bible is God's baby talk. God could have given a book that we could not have possibly begun to understand. The baby talk is hard enough! Some come to seminary and learn Greek, Hebrew, and exegesis and try to learn how to interpret the baby talk. However, it could have been impossible. It is a challenge now, but at least it is possible. So, we will see Calvin frequently using this principle of accommodation in his *Institutes*. Calvin said that it really goes beyond coming down to us to our level in order to speak to us in stories, poems, and parables—things that we can grasp. But, we must (this is not in the *Institutes* but in Calvin's commentary on Romans) consider what questions each is able to bear and accommodate our doctrine to the capacity of the individual. That is an application in homiletics. Calvin said, "Just as God accommodated Himself to our level, we accommodate ourselves to the level of the people we are called to teach." It is very possible for a seminary graduate to go out and preach and teach and nobody will have the slightest idea what you are talking about unless you learn to accommodate what you learn to the level of the people whom you are to serve.

Calvin's work is rhetorical and devotional. By rhetorical we mean this: Calvin does not embrace the scholastic form of presentation. If you want to know what that is like, just read the first few pages of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*. There you get scholastic, scientific theology. Calvin is much more in the mode of humanist rhetoric. He can be very critical of the scholastics. We find Calvin himself using the principles of humanism. That is not modern, secular humanism, but that is sixteenth-century literary, rhetorical humanism. The word "rhetorical" here means that language is to be used in a way that will move and persuade. In other words, it is not enough just to set forth the truth. It must be set forth in a powerful, moving, and eloquent way.

We will find passages of great eloquence in the *Institutes* where Calvin is using his rhetorical skills from his humanist training in the arts and in law in order to persuade. He is not just showing off or displaying his ability. He wanted words to come alive and become powerful and mighty in their use. Let me read a few sentences from his prefatory address found on page 13 of *Institutes*: "For what is more consonant with faith than to recognize that we are naked of all virtue in order to be clothed by God, that we are empty of all good to be filled by Him, that we are slaves of sin to be freed by Him, blind to be illumined by Him, lame to be made straight by Him, weak to be sustained by Him? Take away from us all occasion for glory that He alone may stand forth gloriously, and we glory in Him." You get the force of those words, do you not? He could say that in a much more pedantic way, but he builds up the power of his utterance by the beauty and power of his words. Somebody has said that Calvin invented the short sentence. Calvin did write, comparatively speaking, in a crisp, modern form with not a lot of subordinate clauses. His sentences move on nicely. They are short sentences. They might look long to us, but they

are not nearly as long as the paragraph-long sentences that you will find in his contemporaries. Calvin valued figurative language and illustrations. He valued anything that he could use in order to set forth the truth as powerfully and as clearly as he could.

We will have to stop there. We still have the word “devotional” to look at and the purpose of the *Institutes*.