

## Men's Bible Study 2018: Calvin's Institutes

### LESSON 1: Introduction

John Calvin intended the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to be a manual to teach candidates for the ministry how to rightly understand God's Word. My goal is to make the *Institutes* more accessible to non-ministers.

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## I. A Brief History John Calvin (1509–1564)

John Calvin was born July 10, 1509 in a city about 58 miles northeast of Paris. At the University of Paris Calvin received a thoroughly conservative training in the Roman Catholic faith. But he rejected that faith after his conversion.

He describes his own conversion in his commentary on the Psalms: “At first, while I remained so obstinately addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy, that it would have been hard indeed to have pulled me out of so deep a quagmire – by sudden conversion, God subdued me and made my heart teachable.” From that time onward Calvin gave his life to the cause of the reformation and its two main principles: (1) Scripture alone is the ultimate authority for faith and life; and (2) sinners are justified by faith in Christ alone, and not by works.

John Calvin was a “second generation” Reformer. He was 26 years younger than Martin Luther, whom most historians consider to have started the Reformation on Oct. 31, 1517. Luther had the courage and the originality to break with the Roman Catholic Church and to speak in no uncertain terms against its evils. Calvin completed the task which Luther had begun. Protestant Churches which subscribed to the theology of John Calvin sprang up early in various European countries, including France, Germany, England, Scotland, and Holland. To distinguish them from other protestant denominations (such as Lutheran), these churches are officially known as Reformed.

A little over fifty years after Calvin’s death in 1564 the Reformation that started in Europe was brought to our country by our Pilgrim forefathers, who undertook a voyage to America “for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith” (Mayflower Compact, 1620). According to Historian Philip Schaff, “The earliest and most influential settlers of the United States – the Puritans of England, the Presbyterians of Scotland and Ireland, the Huguenots of France, the Reformed from Holland and the Palatinate [in Germany] – were Calvinists, and brought with them the Bible and the Reformed Confessions of Faith. Calvinism was the ruling theology of New England during the whole Colonial Period.”

“The resistance of the Second Continental Congress to British tyranny in 1776 and the establishment of republican principles in the Constitution of the United States of America in 1787 owe much to the political thought of John Calvin” (RCUS pastor, Dr. Mark Larson, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the State*, 99).

“It is undeniable that he had a large influence on the American founding fathers, who had absorbed much more Calvinism, particularly in their views of the nature of man and the need for limited government, than some realize” (David Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World*, 40). George Bancroft, the American historian, who himself was not a Calvinist, “credited the ‘free institutions of America’ as being derived ‘chiefly from Calvinism through the medium of Puritanism, ... concluding: ‘He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty’” (Ibid. 12).

## II. A Brief History and Summary of the Institutes

After a long and difficult journey, fleeing France because of persecution, Calvin finally found rest in Basel Switzerland in January 1535. “There, he heard that many followers of the Reformation were still being burned alive in France” (Simonette Carr, *John Calvin*, 19).

To try to do something about it, Calvin published the first edition (only 6 chapters) of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in August 1535, when he was only 26 years old. After several revisions, the final edition published in 1559 had 80 chapters; and had become, as Calvin intended, a manual to “instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word” (Preface, 1559).

Calvin addressed the *Institutes* to the Roman Catholic king of France, Francis I, pleading with him to put an end to the unjust persecution of his French countrymen, who were being falsely accused of wanting (like the Anabaptists in Munster) to abolish all laws and overthrow civil government. Calvin wanted to prove that these allegations were not true, and to show all people what the Reformed Church really stood for.

In the Preface, Calvin answers all the main Roman Catholic objections to the Reformation:

- The Catholics call our doctrine ‘new.’ First, the only reason why our doctrine seems to be new is because the true gospel has been buried for a long time on account of man’s ungodliness. But God by His goodness has restored the true gospel to us.
- They ask what miracles have confirmed our doctrine. In demanding miracles of us, they act dishonestly. For we are not inventing some new gospel, but are holding on to that very gospel which has already been confirmed by all the miracles that Jesus Christ and His apostles did.
- They ask whether it is right to disagree with the church fathers and tradition. Scripture, not the church fathers or tradition, is the ultimate authority. Indeed, it is possible for the majority of people to be wrong, as was the case in the days of Noah. If the contest were to be determined by the church fathers, “the tide of victory would turn to our side.” For example, the church fathers condemned images of Christ, and said priests should be allowed to marry.
- The Catholics are wrong to claim they are the true church. It is clear from Scripture that “the church can exist without any visible appearance [like the 7000 who did not bow to Baal];” and that when it is visible its mark is not outward magnificence but rather “the pure preaching of God’s Word and the lawful administration of the sacraments.” Did not the visible church (scribes and Pharisees) err when they decided to crucify Christ?
- They want us to admit that our doctrine is divisive since it has given birth to so many different churches and factions, and so many violent disturbances. Elijah, who was accused of being a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17), “taught us what we ought to reply to such charges: it is not we who either spread errors abroad or incite tumults; but it is they who contend against God’s power [1 Kings 18:18].” Should the apostles “have deserted the gospel because they saw that it was the seedbed of so many quarrels, the source of so many dangers, the occasion of so many scandals?”

Calvin scholar John T. McNeill called the *Institutes* a masterpiece, which “holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected the course of history, molding the beliefs and behavior of generations of mankind.”

### III. The Institutes Structure and Outline

Where should one begin in giving a summary of the Bible and of the Christian faith? Calvin follows the example of the apostle Paul in Romans 1, who begins with a demonstration of our need for salvation in order to bear witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Calvin begins with the foundational claim that in the act of creation God implanted in man a knowledge of Himself; and that we are born with this knowledge, which means that we are aware of God the moment we are aware of ourselves and our surroundings (see Romans 1:18-21).

Therefore, “the subject matter of Christian theology is the knowledge of God and ourselves.... Calvin organizes his treatment of the knowledge of God and of ourselves in terms of the knowledge of God the Triune Creator (Book I) and the knowledge of God the Triune Redeemer (Books II-IV) .... First, this arrangement underscores Calvin’s conviction that the Triune God who redeems is also the one who creates.... Second, Calvin begins where he does...to lead his readers to Christ. This he attempts to do by indicating how inexcusable our willful infidelity is, and how helpless is our condition without the initiative of God in redemption.”

In his explanation of these things, Calvin follows “the four articles of the Apostles’ Creed: God the Father, the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth, is the author of redemption (Book I); God the Son is sent by the Father and accomplishes that redemption which was anticipated under the Old Covenant (Book II); and God the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, makes us partakers of redemption in Christ through the gift of faith (Book III), and through the external means of church and sacraments (Book IV)” (Dr. Cornelis Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, pp.47-48,51).

BOOK ONE: The Knowledge of God the Creator (18 chapters)

BOOK TWO: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ (17 chapters)

BOOK THREE: The Way in which we Receive the Grace of Christ (25 chapters)

BOOK FOUR: The External Means by which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein (20 chapters)

\*See CONTENTS handout

#### IV. *Institutes*, BOOK 1, Chapter 1.

##### **BOOK ONE**

##### *The Knowledge of God the Creator*

##### **CHAPTER I**

##### THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND THAT OF OURSELVES ARE CONNECTED. HOW THEY ARE INTERRELATED

###### (1.1.1) *Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God*

“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.” It is not easy to discern “which one precedes and brings forth the other... In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves;” and the “miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, especially compels us to look upward.... Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God. Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and – what is more – depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone.... and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves.”

###### (1.1.2) *Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self*

“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. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy – this pride is innate in all of us – unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.”

###### (1.1.3) *Man before God's majesty*

The proof that man is never sufficiently affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty, is found in those passages which represent “the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God” [Genesis 18:27; Judges 6:22-23; 13:22; 1 Kings 19:13; Job 7:5; 38:1ff.; Psalm 22:6; Isaiah 2:10, 19; 6:2,5; 24:23; Ezekiel 1:28; 2:1].

“Yet, however the knowledge of God and of ourselves may be mutually connected, the order of right teaching requires that we discuss the former [knowledge of God] first, then proceed afterward to treat the latter [knowledge of ourselves].”