

Piety's Wisdom

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*A Summary of Calvin's Institutes
with Study Questions*

J. Mark Beach



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Piety's Wisdom

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*To my wife, Sberyl,
with whom I first ventured
a study of Calvin.
I love you.*

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Preface

Why another book on Calvin and his book, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*? The answer is simple; many people will never attempt to read Calvin's classic work. They are intimidated because of its daunting size and detail.

Some years ago when I was serving as pastor to a congregation of believers in Pella, Iowa, I proposed to the adult study group that we study Calvin's *Institutes*. I was encouraged by how many were interested in the project. But I also saw furrowed brows. Some asked, "You're not expecting us to read all the way through the *Institutes*, are you?" At that moment I tasked myself with writing a synopsis of Calvin's two big volumes.

The plan was clear. I set out to write summaries of each of Calvin's chapters, trying to capture Calvin's method of presentation and the tenor of his discussion. People in the study group who wanted to tackle assigned sections of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were encouraged to do so, but those who simply wanted to read the synopsis that I provided were free to do only that. Since this was to be an adult study of Christian doctrine—particularly of Reformed doctrine—I ended each chapter synopsis with questions for discussion so we might apply Calvin's thinking to some of the issues we face today as believers. Some of these questions directed readers to look more carefully at Scripture, while other questions addressed controversial matters that needed clarity or correction. The goal, however, was to introduce readers to the rudiments of Reformed doctrine, and in so doing to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith, which was the very goal of Calvin in writing the *Institutes*.

Thus this book came to life more than fifteen years ago, but it is now twice the size of the original draft, covering all of Calvin's two volumes.

One might still ask, why write another book on Calvin and the *Institutes*? I offer two reasons for such a project. First, Calvin remains an outstanding

teacher of the church. Though the *Institutes* show the marks of age (the weaknesses of sixteenth-century polemics, as well as a certain lopsidedness in treating some topics in disproportionate detail), nonetheless, these two volumes are still winsome, thought-provoking, spiritually inspiring, and heart-searching summations of Christian truth. Thus a modern summary of this work still serves the church today.

Second, though a number of works either offer an analysis of Calvin's views or serve as a guide to his *Institutes*, none shares the pedagogical aim of this book. This summary of Calvin's *Institutes*, keeping to the form, shape, and tenor of Calvin's own work, is offered to busy pastors, seminarians, college students, and laypersons who want a book that presents Calvin on his own terms and does not press an agenda. Thus this summary can be used as an introduction to the Christian faith, as a primer for the study of Calvin, or a combination of each. It can also be used individually or jointly in an adult study group.

I also want to offer a few comments about what this summary does not aim to do. This book does not aim to be a book for Calvin scholars. I am not trying to present a fresh vision on Calvin or his works. Nor am I seeking to commandeer Calvin to win some modern, theological fight. The goal of this synopsis is more modest in the academic sense but no less important in the churchly sense, namely, to present Calvin as a teacher of biblical truth and thus to instruct believers today in the faith they profess. This book therefore is directed to all persons who want to read Calvin's theology but find themselves short on time and too overwhelmed to study the bulky volumes that comprise the *Institutes*. Many such persons, I suspect, still want to learn from Calvin; they want to deepen their knowledge of the Reformed faith beyond a conventional verse-by-verse study of the Bible, and they want to mature in their devotion and trust in the Lord. This book, then, is written for them.

In this connection, here are a few comments on how to use this book. As a summary of Calvin's book, it stands on its own. If readers wish to read Calvin's *Institutes* as well, I certainly encourage this. But that isn't the intention of this synopsis. The summary can be read as a basic manual in Reformed doctrine or as a synoptic guide to Calvin's book (or both). It can be used as a book of doctrine in an adult study group setting, in which the study questions can be explored with other believers. Some chapters will be more challenging than others, some of more current interest than others, but every chapter aims to present Calvin fairly and accurately. I have used Calvin's

own words as much as possible. Even when I am not directly quoting Calvin, I have tried to capture the texture and tenor of his words. I have not skipped the bulky polemical sections of Calvin's *Institutes*, but neither have I tried to present all the details of Calvin's heated disputations with others. We must remember that, for all its merits, the *Institutes*, like any book, is a product of its time. It still serves us very well, but there are new ideas and errors that need new answers and replies. In any case, this summary is offered in hopes that Calvin's rich contribution to Christian theology, especially to Reformed theology, may serve a new generation of believers.

I thank the publisher for interest in this project and for the patience shown me as I met with many unforeseen providences that delayed the completion of this work. I also express my heartfelt gratitude to Abby Schaaf, Secretary to the Faculty at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and to student, Matt Van Dyken, for their assistance in the preparation of this book for publication. I thank my colleague at Mid-America, Dr. Cornelis P. Venema, whose interest in and love for Calvin's theology surpasses my own, and who, as a conversation partner on Calvin through the years, has significantly enriched my own knowledge of the great Genevan. In addition, in this year celebrating the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth, I want to mention three professors—Dr. James A. De Jong, Dr. Richard C. Gamble, and Dr. Richard A. Muller—under whom I studied Calvin over the years. Each, in his own way, has contributed to my understanding of and appreciation for Calvin and his work. Finally, I thank my wife, Sheryl, for her wise counsel concerning this book. Her warm presence encouraged me through the entire writing process. It is only fitting that this project is completed on her birthday!

—J. Mark Beach
November 24, 2009

Calvin's Institutes in Context

JOHN CALVIN'S *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is one of the magnificent classics of Christian literature. As we embark upon a study of this work our aim is threefold: (1) to become familiar with one of the great theologians of the Christian church; (2) to gain an appreciation of the Reformed Protestant tradition—Calvin, though he is not the single representative of Reformed thinking, is arguably that tradition's most influential theologian; and (3) to cultivate in ourselves, in Calvin-like concern, a genuine life of piety.

Theological Stakes and Issues

In order to appreciate Calvin's achievement as a theologian and church leader, we need to orient ourselves to the times in which Calvin lived and labored. One place to begin is by looking at the "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," which served as a prologue to the numerous editions of Calvin's *Institutes*. In this address Calvin states explicitly why he wrote the *Institutes* and what he hoped to achieve.

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 our 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.¹

Calvin maintains that his aim is to bring instruction to the ignorant souls of France, as well as to offer, by means of this work, a confession of the Protestant faith which is so hated and persecuted by its opponents. In fact, in the

1. "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France" in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 9. Note: all quotations from the *Institutes* will be taken from this work, unless otherwise noted.

Author's Preface to his Psalms commentary, Calvin offers a more extended explanation why he was moved to publish the *Institutes*. While at Basel, Calvin learned that "many faithful and holy people were burnt alive in France." To justify such pitiless treatment, the French court produced and circulated pamphlets which argued that only those guilty of the most seditious errors and heretical blunders, thereby overthrowing true religion altogether, came to such capital justice. This slander against the French Protestants who were of sound and sober doctrine, so stirred Calvin that he felt he would be guilty of gross cowardice and mean treachery if he remained silent and failed to oppose this tyranny. "This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*."² In that connection he also explains the aim he had in mind in bringing this work to press.

My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord; and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them (p. xlii).

Thus both in the Prefatory Address to King Francis I and the Author's Preface to his Psalms commentary we see the peril that the Reformed movement faced in French-speaking lands, especially those under the province of the French crown. We do not know whether King Francis ever actually read the *Institutes* or Calvin's address to him, but Calvin issued the work as an appeal against unjust slander. "For ungodly men have so far prevailed that Christ's truth, even if it is not driven away scattered and destroyed, still lies hidden, buried and inglorious. The poor little church has either been wasted with cruel slaughter or banished into exile, or so overwhelmed by threats and fears that it dare not even open its mouth.... Meanwhile no one comes forward to defend the church against such furies" (Prefatory Address, p. 11).

Calvin asks the French king to consider the sufferings of the Protestants, who have set their hope on the living God (1 Tim. 4:10). "For the sake of this hope some of us are shackled with irons, some beaten with rods, some led about as laughingstocks, some proscribed, some most savagely tortured,

2. John Calvin, "The Author's Preface," in *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, First volume, trans. James Anderson, Calvin Translation Society (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), xli-xlii.

some forced to flee. All of us are oppressed by poverty, cursed with dire execrations, wounded by slanders, and treated in most shameful ways" (p. 14).

Calvin argues that the Protestant cause is neither new, nor unknown or uncertain. It is the faith of the Apostles, and seems unfamiliar only because it has long been buried through human impiety. In support of this claim Calvin seeks to demonstrate that the church fathers prove hostile to many Roman Catholic practices; therefore, it is illegitimate to appeal to them as antagonists to the Protestant faith. He also contends against Rome's appeal to "custom" or what we would call "tradition." Truth must prevail over custom, and believers must yield to truth over custom. "To sum up, evil custom is nothing but a kind of public pestilence in which men do not perish the less though they fall with the multitude" (p. 23).

Calvin also maintains that Rome errs about the nature of the church itself. Arguing against those he calls the Papists (proponents of the Roman papacy), Calvin clarifies the Protestant position:

Our controversy turns on these hinges: first, they contend that the form of the church is always apparent and observable. Second, they set this form in the see [office] of the Roman Church and its hierarchy. We, on the contrary, affirm that the church can exist without any visible appearance, and that its appearance is not contained within that outward magnificence which they foolishly admire. Rather, it has quite another mark, namely the pure preaching of God's Word and the lawful administration of the sacraments. They rage if the church cannot always be pointed to with the finger. But among the Jewish people how often was it so deformed that no semblance of it remained? (pp. 24–25).

Calvin is not here arguing that the church should not be expected to come to visible manifestation, but he is jealous to demonstrate that the church is a corruptible institution. He points to the fact that in the course of history God has repeatedly punished the unfaithful by a temporary obliteration of the visible image of the true church, yet his children are preserved from extinction.

In reply to the charge by Roman opponents that Protestant preaching was inciting so many appalling disturbances, tumults, and contentions, Calvin contends that Satan, not the gospel, disturbs and disrupts the church. The devil has taken radicals and other "monstrous rascals" into his army "in order to obscure and at last extinguish the truth." Besides, the same things

were said about Elijah (you troubler of Israel), Christ (the charge of sedition), and the Apostles (cf. Acts 24:5ff) (pp. 27–30).

In addressing the French monarch Calvin pleads for a fair hearing of Christ's cause, reminding Francis that the persecuted Protestants seek the King's success as they strive to be good citizens and live exemplary lives of godliness (pp. 30–31).

From the above we are able to discern the threatening environment in which Calvin, with his fellow Protestants, lived and labored. The stakes were high. One professed the Protestant faith under threat of death.

In order to grasp the *theological* tenor of the times, we do well to examine another early writing of Calvin, specifically, his defense of the Protestant faith against Jacopo Cardinal Sadoletto, Bishop of Carpentras in southern France. Sadoletto wrote a letter to the citizens of Geneva, urging them to return to the Roman Catholic fold. His letter, written in a conciliatory and winsome manner, stated that the Protestant Reformers were heretical innovators and that their ideas were without theological standing, of suspect pedigree, and harmful to the rich heritage of the truth deposited to the church's care.

The Genevan authorities were troubled by Sadoletto's letter—they knew they were unable to provide an articulate and persuasive reply to him. Consequently, they solicited Calvin's help. Calvin, barely thirty years of age, responded in a masterful fashion. His *Reply to Sadoletto* is a potent rejoinder.³

The flavor of the times in which Calvin lived—especially the *theological* flavor of the times—becomes evident from the Sadoletto-Calvin debate. We note some of the salient features of Sadoletto's letter and Calvin's reply.

For his part, Sadoletto fairly and clearly articulated the Catholic position. Here we present some representative statements from Sadoletto's writing to the Genevans. He makes it clear that acceptance before God is not solely grounded in Christ and His work. For example, he states: "Christ was sent that *we, by well-doing*, may through Him, be accepted of God, and that we

3.Sadoletto's letter and Calvin's response to it have been published together under the title: *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976).

may be built up in Him unto good works..." (p. 36, italics added). He does not deny the importance of faith, but typical of the way in which Roman Catholic theologians defined faith, Sadoletto incorporates the works of faith into the definition of what constitutes faith. "When we say, then, that we can be saved by faith alone in God and Jesus Christ, we hold that in this very faith *love is essentially comprehended as the chief and primary cause of our salvation*" (p. 36, italics added). The key phrase is that love is "essentially comprehended" in what faith is and therefore the works of faith (love) are constitutive of the cause of salvation. Given the failures of our faith, Sadoletto points to the role of the church: "And if, at any time, overcome by frailty and inconstancy, we lapse into sin..., we...rise again in the same faith of the Church; and by whatever expiations, penances, and satisfactions, she tells us that our sin is washed away..." (p. 37).

Sadoletto also appeals to the superiority of the ancient and unified teaching of the Roman Catholic Church against the Protestant innovators. "The point in dispute is whether is it more expedient for your salvation, and whether you think you will do what is more pleasing to God, by believing and following what the Catholic Church throughout the whole world, now for more than fifteen hundred years, or...more than thirteen hundred years approves with general consent; or innovations introduced within these twenty-five years, by crafty or, as they think themselves, acute men; but men certainly who are not themselves the Catholic Church?" (pp. 40–41). In short, Sadoletto's point is simple, namely, that it is much more likely that the church, for its many years of existence, has been imparting the truth versus the untimely and novel labors of a few individuals who have confused the thinking of ordinary believers.

Calvin responded to Sadoletto's position (represented by the remarks quoted above) with his own well-stated arguments. Since the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the principal teaching in dispute, not surprisingly Calvin aims some of his arrows at that target. "This, meanwhile, we constantly maintain, that man is not only justified freely once for all, without any merit of works, but that on this gratuitous justification the salvation of man perpetually depends. Nor is it possible that any work of man can be accepted by God unless it be gratuitously approved. Wherefore, I was amazed when I read your assertion, that love is the first and chief cause of salvation" (p. 69). Calvin is careful to point out that when this doctrine is not understood, this leads to an error about the church as well: "Your ignorance of this doctrine leads you on to the error of teaching that sins are expiated by

penances and satisfactions.” Of course, the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church and its ministry was in large measure defined by its doctrine of the papacy. Thus Calvin writes: “Let your Pontiff, then, boast as he may of the succession of Peter: even should he make good his title to it, he will establish nothing more than that obedience is due to him from the Christian people, so long as he himself maintains his fidelity to Christ, and deviates not from the purity of the gospel” (p. 77).

As for Sadoletto’s appeal to the ancient pedigree of the teaching of Rome, Calvin makes clear that finally there can be only one supreme authority in the church, which is the Word of God. “We hold that the Word of God alone lies beyond the sphere of our judgment, and that Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they accord with the rule of the Word...” (p. 92). This leads Calvin to take up a more sinister and disturbing accusation set at the feet of the Reformers, specifically, that they are destroyers of the church, enemies to its well-being, and akin to the blind leading the blind. Thus he writes: “But the most serious charge of all is that we have attempted to dismember the Spouse of Christ. Were that true, both you and the whole world might well regard us as desperate. But I will not admit the charge, unless you can make out that the Spouse of Christ is dismembered by those who desire to present her as a chaste virgin to Christ—who are animated by a degree of holy zeal to preserve her spotless for Christ—who, seeing her polluted by base seducers, recall her to conjugal fidelity—who unhesitatingly wage war against all the adulterers whom they detect laying snares for her chastity. And what but this have we done? Had not your faction of a Church attempted, nay, violated her chastity, by strange doctrines? Had she not been violently prostituted by your numberless superstitions? Had she not been defiled by that vilest species of adultery, the worship of images? And because, forsooth, we did not suffer you so to insult the sacred chamber of Christ, we are said to have lacerated His Spouse” (pp. 92–93).

From the tenor of Sadoletto’s and Calvin’s remarks it is evident that both believed that the gospel itself was at stake for the Genevans; therefore, the salvation of souls was also at stake. Roman Catholics and Protestants, to this day, continue to debate these sorts of issues.

A Sketch of Calvin's Life

As we engage in this summary survey of Calvin's *Institutes* it is fitting that we know something about his life. Although this is not the setting to present an extended biography of John Calvin, a few aspects of his life and labor should be noted.

Calvin was born on July 10, 1509 in the small town of Noyon in Picardy in northern France. Luther was born in 1483 and Zwingli in 1484. That means that Calvin was eight years old when Luther nailed his "Ninety-five Theses" to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, October 31, 1517. We need to remember that Calvin stood on the shoulders of the first generation Reformers, but we may fairly state that in erudition he came to surpass them all. With the exception of Luther, no Protestant Reformer in the sixteenth century exercised a more profound influence on the ecclesiastical world, and no other Reformer matched Calvin in the rhetorical power of his work.

Calvin was a Frenchman, but most of his life's labors would take place in Geneva, Switzerland. He received a fine education and had associations with the upper strata of society—Luther was of more humble origins. Calvin was bourgeois, that is, he came from the middle-class, but rubbed elbows with the ranks of the elite.

Calvin was a superior student. Early on he exhibited extraordinary intellectual abilities. Consequently, Calvin's father sent him to the University of Paris where he was first enrolled at the Collège de La Marche in order to study for the priesthood. He spent about one year there, and then he enrolled at the more renowned Collège Montaigu—something like the Harvard or Yale of that day—where he spent five years, 1523 to 1528, earning a master's degree. His father, subsequently, altered plans for his son and determined that Calvin should study law—law would prepare Calvin for a lucrative career. Calvin dutifully obeyed his father. He left Paris and went to Orléans, where he studied law and Greek. Calvin continued his legal studies at Bourges.

When Calvin's father suddenly died in 1531, he felt liberated from the obligation to continue his law studies. He immediately enrolled at the Collège de France in Paris and pursued studies in Greek and Hebrew, and wished to become a great humanist scholar like Erasmus. Calvin had received rigorous training in Latin and rhetoric, and possessed a deep knowledge of the Greek/Latin classics. He also had a firm grasp of philosophy and law. In His providence, God was preparing the vessel of His choosing for a great work.

Wishing to pursue the life of a scholar, his first publication in 1532

was a Latin work, an academic commentary, on Seneca's *De Clementia* (On Clemency). Some scholars believe that this work was published shortly after Calvin's conversion. A stronger case can be made, however, that places his conversion in the year 1533. In any event, somewhere around this timeframe Calvin appears to have undergone a "sudden" conversion experience which marked an irreparable break with the Roman Catholic Church. As Calvin writes:

And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.⁴

Because of his Protestant convictions, he had to flee France. He found refuge in Basel, Switzerland. It was here, in 1535/36, that Calvin produced his first writing for the cause of the Reformation, the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was a well-ordered, brief, and synoptic presentation of Reformed teaching. It was a modest work in its first edition, and Calvin sought no notoriety from it. He writes, "When it was then published, it was not that copious and laboured 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 flagitious and perfidious flatterers" (Author's Preface, xlii). Calvin would expand and revise this institution or instruction manual in the Christian religion many times throughout the remainder of his life.

Subsequently, Calvin made travels to northern Italy in order to visit the Duchess of Ferrara, the sister of the French king, who had given shelter to a number of Reformed refugees. On his return from Italy, journeying to Strasbourg, Germany, Calvin found himself needing to take a detour through Geneva, Switzerland, because of war in the region. He intended to

4. John Calvin, "The Author's Preface," in *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, First volume, trans. James Anderson, Calvin Translation Society (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), xl–xli.

stay in Geneva just overnight, but he was pressed into service for the Protestant cause by Guillaume Farel, a man twenty years Calvin's senior. Farel had been laboring for reform in Geneva for some time. He immediately recognized Calvin's talent and enlisted him to serve the Protestant cause in that city. When Calvin informed Farel that he planned to retire to a quiet life of study and writing, Farel uttered down a curse from God—a curse that God would damn his sought-after tranquility! Calvin was so shocked and moved by this imprecation that he relented and joined the reform movement in Geneva in August 1536.

After a brief period of reforming work in Geneva, however, Farel and Calvin were both expelled from the city. Their proposals proved too radical for and not to the taste of the Genevans. Calvin went to Strasbourg, where, under the influence of Martin Bucer, he labored for the French refugee congregation from 1538 to 1541. It was during this period that the city authorities of Geneva solicited Calvin to write a response to Cardinal Sadoleto, the Bishop of Carpentras in southern France. Sadoleto was urging the Genevans back to the Roman Catholic fold. Calvin took up this task with his "Reply to Sadoleto," wherein (as we noted above) he masterfully defended the cause of the Reformation. He not only dismantled the Bishop's winsome case for Roman teaching, but in doing so Calvin exhibited a pastoral passion for souls and a love for the gospel, revealing his personal zeal for Christ. This reply served to open the door for renewed labor among the Genevans, and in 1541 Calvin was invited back to Geneva. The course of Calvin's life was now set, for he ministered in the city for the rest of his years. He died on the twenty-seventh day of May, 1564, about a month and a half before his 55th birthday.

Calvin was a prolific writer—often assisted by secretaries and stenographers. Through his writings he continues to exercise his greatest influence. He wrote either commentaries or expository lectures on most of the books of the Bible. Besides the numerous redactions and increasing bulk of his *Institutes*, Calvin also penned numerous polemical treatises, treating at length topics like providence, predestination, the Lord's Supper, freedom of the will, and various works addressing Libertines, Anabaptists, Lutherans, and especially Roman Catholics in their doctrines and practices. Some of Calvin's writings were directed toward the pastoral work of ministry as seen, for example, in the numerous sermons which were taken down in dictation and later published, the important catechisms he authored, as well as works

dealing with visitation to the sick, church polity, liturgical issues, and other aspects of a minister's work.

The Nature of the Institutes

As noted above, the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* appeared in the year 1536. The aforementioned "Prefatory Address to King Francis I" was written August 23, 1535 when Calvin was only twenty-six years old. Later Latin editions appeared in 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559; and Calvin's own French translations of the work appeared in 1541, 1545, 1551, and 1560. Calvin expanded the *Institutes* with each edition, and in the final edition thoroughly re-arranged material. The *Institutes* was a work that catapulted Calvin to greatness, though not immediately. He was still relatively unknown after the publication of the first edition. However, after a brief time and with subsequent and expanded editions of the *Institutes*, Calvin was a much sought after teacher and leader. The *Institutes* was to become his life's work.

Calvin originally conceived of the *Institutes* as a kind of handbook, that is, as a tool to assist students of the Bible to delve deeply into the Scriptures with some confidence. He did not offer them in order to replace the Bible, but as a handbook to make Scripture easier to understand and advancement in it less difficult. As the *Institutes* grew in size they obviously ceased to be a "handbook," but they remained an instruction manual in theology "for the reading of the divine Word."⁵

This work, an institution—or instruction book—in the Christian religion was loosely ordered according to the Apostles' Creed. It also shows traits that pattern it after the book of Romans. Specifically, it is divided into four books: Book I—The Knowledge of God the Creator; Book II—The Knowledge of God the Redeemer; Book III—The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ; and Book IV—The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ. The trinitarian ordering of the work is seen in that the first three books each focus upon the work of the Persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Calvin's *Institutes* has had a long life in the English language. It was first translated into English by Thomas Norton in 1561, and reprinted many times thereafter: 1562, 1574, 1578, 1582, 1587, 1599, 1611, 1634, and 1762. It is worth noting that in this publication history there is a considerable gap, spanning more than 125 years from 1634 to 1762. A new and fresh transla-

5. "John Calvin to the Reader" in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, p. 4.

tion of Calvin's *Institutes* into English did not appear until the John Allen translation of 1813; this was followed by Henry Beveridge's translation in 1845, and Ford Lewis Battles' translation in 1960.

Study Helps and Abridgements of the Institutes

Students of Calvin have long had available to them several significant "helps" which make a study of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* a slightly less daunting task. Ford Lewis Battles's *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin*, assisted by John Walchenbach (1980), presents a fairly detailed summary of the essential components of each section of Calvin's volumes. Also worthy of note is T.H.L. Parker's *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (1995). This work is essentially an examination of the four books of the *Institutes*, following its chapters and presentation of topics. Two other analytical works worthy of mention are Wilhelm Niesel's *The Theology of Calvin* (1956), and François Wendel's *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (1963).

A new study by Anthony N.S. Lane is similar but distinct from each of these prior projects, entitled *A Reader's Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (2009). As a reader's guide to the *Institutes*, Lane's volume is not to be read on its own, i.e., it is not intended to be used independently of Calvin's *Institutes*; rather, it is a volume that assists readers as they make their way through Calvin's work, chapter by chapter, section by section. Moreover, this is a guide to the Battles translation of the *Institutes* in the Library of Christian Classics series, edited by John T. McNeill. Thus Lane will refer readers from time to time to footnotes and references from the Battles/McNeill edition. Another work worthy of mention is the recently published title, *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (2008), edited by David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback.

For readers who may not wish to tackle a secondary source on Calvin, but know that the sheer bulk of the *Institutes* constitutes too tall an order for their time or ambition, they might consider a compendium of the work instead, such as Hugh T. Kerr's *Calvin's Institutes: A New Compend* (1989), or Donald K. McKim's abridgement of the *Institutes* (2000). Finally, a slender compendium of the *Institutes* which has the unique feature of being mildly re-written for the modern reader—i.e., rendering Calvin's prose more accessible to a general reading public—is a title edited by Tony Lane and re-written by Hilary Osborne, *John Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1987).

For Study Groups

For those who wish to use this summary of Calvin's *Institutes* in a study group, many of its chapters can be tackled in one session. Some chapters, perhaps, are better handled in two or more sessions, partly because of their length, and partly because the subject matter they treat is detailed or heavy in content. Like everything else in life, diligent effort, coupled with patient reflection and willingness to learn from others, combined with a prayerful dependency upon the Lord, will reap benefits beyond what is sown. I urge readers, in working through this book, to go slow when necessary, to write down questions if material is not immediately clear or understandable, to meditate on and consider the many ways Calvin's presentation of the Christian religion applies to the Christian life, and to heed Calvin's exhortation to take the things of God and use them for edification. These sorts of goals fit with Calvin's aim in writing his instruction manual in the Christian faith, namely that we gain a true knowledge of God and of ourselves which issues forth into a life of piety to God's glory.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Calvin's aim in writing the *Institutes* differ from the reason or aim in many serious works on theology today?
2. What do we learn about the situation of the Protestant cause in France from Calvin's Prefatory Address to King Francis I, the Author's Preface of his Psalms commentary, and his reply to Sadoletto?
3. Inasmuch as Calvin is concerned to defend the legitimacy of affirming the invisibility of the church against the Roman Catholic Church, what do we learn from the life of Elijah? (cf. 1 Kings 19:9–18), Micaiah? (cf. 1 Kings 22:5–28), Jeremiah? (cf. Jeremiah 18), Christ? (cf. John 18:12ff., 19ff.; Luke 22:66–23:1). How do these examples serve to illustrate Calvin's point about the church's invisibility?
4. About whom may Calvin have been speaking when he talks about "monstrous rascals"? Who, besides the Lutherans and the Reformed, were, according to Rome, stirring up trouble? And what characterized the life and teaching of "these rascals"?

5. What key doctrinal issues emerge from the Sadoletto/Calvin debate? (Think of the Protestant *solas*).

6. What were the advantages for the Protestant cause and for Calvin that he was educated and trained in law, languages, and especially the new learning of the Renaissance? Why is an educated clergy necessary for the health of the church today?

Institutes of the Christian Religion

Book One

The Knowledge of God the Creator

Knowing God

Chapters 1–5 of Book One

Chapter One: The Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves Are Connected, and How They Are Interrelated

Orientation

WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE—those are the concepts that Calvin takes up in the first chapter of Book One of the *Institutes*. Wisdom and knowledge are also what the remainder of Calvin’s work will seek to impart to its readers. Christian truth is about God, His creation, and their relation—especially the relation God has with human beings. Thus the opening chapters of Book One treat that which is most basic for humans—the knowledge of God. Although quite brief, chapters one through four take up a number of important issues. Chapter one treats the interrelationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves; chapter two defines the knowledge of God; chapter three considers what it means that God has implanted a knowledge of Himself in the human mind, while chapter four demonstrates how sin and corruption have obscured and stifled but not obliterated this knowledge. Then in chapter five Calvin offers an extended discussion of the revelation of God in creation and divine providence. These chapters are foundational to Calvin’s vision and should not be underestimated in their importance for his theological project.

The Sum of True Wisdom

The *Institutes* opens with a discussion of one of the fundamental problems of human existence: how can we know God? Calvin’s answer to that question begins with the observation that the knowledge of God is intertwined with the knowledge of ourselves; indeed, they are inseparably intercon-

nected. Without a true knowledge of God, we cannot know ourselves; and, without a true knowledge of ourselves, we cannot know God. True wisdom consists of this interwoven knowledge, for the creature is dependent on 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. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. 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; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself (1.1.1).

Calvin argues that God's infinite benefits accentuate our poverty of nature—meaning our wickedness and weakness. Our ruin compels us to look upward, for a "veritable world of miseries" afflicts the human race, and its "shameful nakedness exposes a teeming horde of infamies" (1.1.1). Consequently, "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" (1.1.1).

Knowledge of Self is unto Knowledge of God

This means that we become truly dissatisfied with ourselves when we contemplate God in His perfection. In this way we begin to grasp the extent of our misery and ruin. "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" (1.1.2).

Because of our innate pride, we flatter ourselves most highly and praise our uprightness and virtue. With our minds confined to the arena of human corruption we congratulate ourselves most sweetly. We are content with ourselves. But God is "the straightedge to which we must be shaped." When we lift our thoughts to Him the consequences for ourselves soon follow: "what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness. What wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness" (1.1.2). Thus,

whether we contemplate our natural endowments or our wretchedness, human self-knowledge bears with it the knowledge of God.

Humans in God's Presence

Meanwhile, given God's perfection we sense our ugliness and waywardness—thus that “dread and wonder” that even the saints feel in God's presence. The book of Job demonstrates this truth, for “in its description of God's wisdom, power, and purity,” we are presented “a powerful argument that overwhelms men with the realization of their own stupidity, impotence, and corruption [Job 38:381ff.]” (1.1.3). Calvin cites numerous biblical examples of this sort. We never know ourselves until we contemplate ourselves in comparison with God's majesty. The knowledge of God requires a knowledge of self; in truly knowing ourselves, we come to know God. So how does Calvin propose to proceed? He writes: “However the knowledge of God and of ourselves may be mutually connected, the order of right teaching requires that we discuss the former first, then proceed afterward to treat the latter” (1.1.3). So Calvin will first take up a discussion of God and our knowledge of Him before he treats the knowledge we must have of ourselves as His creatures.

Chapter Two: What It Is to Know God, and to What Purpose the Knowledge of Him Tends

Knowledge of God Defined

What is the knowledge of God? That is, what is it to know God? Calvin's answer is more than intellectual or theoretical: “Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him” (1.2.1). The testimony of the creation calls us to recognize God as our Creator. For God yet sustains and governs the universe He has made, as He yet watches over the human race and is the source of all blessing and truth. Thus, God's providential care and forbearing mercy surround His creatures and serve to teach piety, from which religion springs. Knowledge of God, then, is found in “religion” and “piety.” And with “piety” we fix our gaze upon the centerpiece of Calvin's thought.

For Calvin, “piety” is not pietism or being pious in a hypocritical sense. Rather, he defines piety as

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 (1.2.1).

The Religious Purpose of Knowledge of God

Calvin rebels against idle speculation. He wants to be a scriptural theologian, not a philosopher! Hence to ask: What is God?—is foolishness. Our knowledge of God isn't to satisfy a curiosity. "Rather, our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account" (1.2.2). For Calvin, pure and real religion is "faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law. And we ought to note this fact even more diligently: all men have a vague general veneration for God, but very few really reverence him; and wherever there is great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed" (1.2.2).

**Chapter Three: The Knowledge of God Has Been
Naturally Implanted in the Minds of Men**

The Sense of Divinity Implanted in Us

Calvin argues that there is a general knowledge of God as Creator and Sovereign Ruler of the world. This knowledge of God may be discerned throughout His creation—in humanity, in the natural order, and in the historical process itself. Drawing on the apostle Paul's argument in the first two chapters of Romans (though he doesn't quote Romans directly), Calvin demonstrates the universal character of God's testimony in the human heart. For all people have a "sense of divinity" or, what Calvin also calls, a "seed of religion." This seed, implanted in the human mind, accounts for our natural religious instinct, "an awareness of divinity" (1.3.1). This awareness of God leaves all people without excuse.