

Knowledge of God and of Ourselves: The Theology of John Calvin

When Calvin was 27 and he had been a Protestant for two or three years, his second book was published. That book was *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. One modern scholar has said, “It is a book that holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected Western civilization.” We can perhaps expand on that by noting that through the world mission movement the book has affected, at least the church, around the world. I am going to talk about that book in this lesson. I will devote an entire lesson to one book, but it is a very important book. As we looked at Luther’s theology, we will look at Calvin’s theology. The difference is that Calvin wrote a systematic theology, and we can study Calvin’s *Institutes* and understand what his theology was.

As I pray, I would like to use a prayer from Calvin. When Calvin preached, his prayers were recorded, as well as his sermons. The prayer I will use is one that followed Calvin’s sermon on 1 Samuel 2. Let us bow together in prayer.

“Let us therefore bow before the majesty of our good God, recognizing the great number of faults and offenses with which we have provoked His wrath against us. Let us pray to Him that He may etch the fear of His majesty upon our minds and make us sharers in those things that we have learned in the Scripture, that by His strength He may support our weakness and infirmity and make us victors by the power of His Spirit and provide sufficient strength for us to withstand any temptations to which we would otherwise be unequal and run the whole course of our lives in obedience to Him, giving eternal thanks to Him for His many and great benefits to us; finally, that all our senses may be lifted up in worshiping Him to His everlasting praise and glory, and we may be led in the pathway of salvation, not for our own private advantage but for the upbuilding of our neighbors. Amen.”

Calvin’s *Institutes* was a book that developed a history in its own lifetime. Calvin did not write it once; he wrote it many times. As we think about the history of this book, we need to begin by thinking about the growth of the book. Calvin tells us in his final and definitive edition of the *Institutes* in 1559 that when he first wrote it in 1536 it was a little booklet of six chapters. By the time he finished in 1559, it was divided into four large books of 80 chapters. In the English translation, the 1536 edition is about 225 pages, and the 1559 edition is over 1500 pages.

Calvin wrote the *Institutes* in Latin. Then he translated his own Latin into French. The various editions of the *Institutes* that came out between the first and the last had not only the Latin texts but also Calvin’s French text. Scholars of French language say that the French edition of 1541 represents a landmark in the development of the French language. Calvin’s writing, his style, in the *Institutes* is important not only for theology, but also for the history of the French language in its literature.

As Calvin developed his book through those years, he did not really revise it, but rather he expanded it. Calvin did not change his mind on any basic doctrinal issue. That is rather remarkable if you realize that the first edition was written when he was in his twenties and then he spent his entire life adding to the *Institutes*. Yet he did not change his mind. Saint Augustine had to write *The Retractions* at the end of his life, in which he reviewed everything he had written and stated what he still agreed with and what he disagreed with. Calvin never wrote anything like that. Part of the reason Calvin did not have to write retractions was that he could read Augustine. Augustine had pioneered so much of the theology that Calvin was presenting.

So it was not that Calvin revised his work, but rather that he greatly expanded it. He expanded it through his study. His study of the church fathers enabled him to add quotations from the church fathers. His favorite church fathers were Chrysostom, the preacher of Constantinople, and Bernard of Clairvaux, who gave Calvin an anchor in the Middle Ages for at least some of his thought. Most of all, he appreciated Saint Augustine. Once, Calvin exalted, “Augustine is totally ours,” even though the Catholics wanted him too. Calvin was probably exaggerating when he said that, because there was a Catholic side of Augustine that Calvin did not adopt. When he was thinking about grace, predestination, and salvation, however, Calvin felt he could say, “Augustine is totally ours.” As Calvin grew in his knowledge of church history and his knowledge of the church fathers, he was able to expand the *Institutes*.

As Calvin grew in his experience in ministry, that also allowed him to expand the *Institutes*. His first short ministry in Geneva was not a highly successful one. Then he had three wonderful years in Strasbourg as pastor of a French refugee church. Then he returned to Geneva, chastened and seasoned, and able to more effectively minister as he served in the church there for the rest of his life. All that he learned in ministry went into the *Institutes*. What he learned expanded the truth that Calvin was setting forth as theology, and it reflected the practical side of Calvin as a pastor.

The primary reason that Calvin was able to expand his theology was his continued study of Scripture. He not only used more Scripture, but he also used Scripture more sensitively. Calvin wrote commentaries on every book in the New Testament, except several of the shorter ones, and on most of the Old Testament. He was working on the commentary on Ezekiel when he died. Almost his last effort went toward writing that commentary, until an unfinished sentence marked the end of Calvin’s life. One book that Calvin did not attempt to write a commentary on was the book of Revelation. Calvin said that he did not write on Revelation because he did not understand it. He did not say nobody could understand it, but he did say he could not understand it. So he did not write on it. One of his contemporaries remarked, “O, most wise Calvin.” As he wrote his commentaries, he was building a biblical theology so that as he expanded the *Institutes* he was able to do so with ever greater use of the Scripture.

There are four words that summarize Calvin’s commentaries: accuracy, clarity, brevity, and humility. He began writing his commentaries with the commentary on Romans in 1540. He viewed Romans as a kind of key to interpreting all of Scripture. In his dedication of his commentary on Romans he wrote, “God limits our knowledge, first that we should be kept humble, and also that we should continue to have dealings with our fellows.” What he meant by that was, God does not give any of us complete knowledge of the Bible so that we can stay humble and also so we can keep in touch with each other. Calvin added in the dedication to his commentary on Romans, “The majesty of the Word of God is somehow diminished if we do not interpret it with great discretion and moderation.” In other words, do not guess and do not add. Instead, with discretion and moderation, say clearly and accurately what the Bible says. Calvin attempted to do that. He wrote in 1544, “God has given me the grace to write what I have written as faithfully as it was in my power. I have not falsified a single passage of the Scripture, nor given it a wrong interpretation, to the best of my knowledge. I have always aimed at simplicity.” Calvin was not a perfect Bible commentator, but he was one of the best to have lived in the history of the church up to his time and even until today. His commentaries are still of great value and significance because they remain wonderful expositions of God’s truth.

Calvin did not revise, but he expanded and he rearranged. Calvin spent all those years rewriting his *Institutes*, but once he wrote something he did not throw it away. It would always appear somewhere in the *Institutes* in the next edition, but not always in the same place. I do not know how Calvin did that without a word processor, but he did. He rewrote all of it, rearranged it all, and he said he was not

satisfied until the final edition in 1559, when he believed that he had finally made it the way he wanted it.

Let me illustrate that with one point. In his earlier editions, through the 1554 edition, Calvin wrote about the doctrine of providence and the doctrine of predestination together in the opening section of the book with the doctrine of God. Calvin first presented the doctrine of God by saying God is the God who creates all things. Then Calvin would say He is also the God who, through His decrees, works all things out in providence, which includes predestination of individuals for heaven. That was all presented in the opening chapters of the *Institutes*. He taught the doctrine of God by saying this is what God is like and this is what God does—He decrees everything.

Something very unusual happened in 1559, however, which I think was very instructive and very helpful. When you read Calvin's *Institutes* you not only get important theological information, but you also get a kind of understanding about where and when to say what you are going to say. For Calvin that was very important. In 1559 Calvin separated those two doctrines. Providence still came in Book I, with the doctrine of God. God creates and God governs. Occasionally he would come very close to saying something about election, but he would check himself and indicate that he was not ready to discuss it. Then he would continue on to something else about God, such as His existence as Trinity, or the attributes of God. So Book I is about God the Creator.

In Book II, Calvin writes about God the Redeemer. It includes the incarnation, the work of Christ, the life of Christ, the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. There is still nothing about election there. Then in Book III, Calvin writes about the way we receive the grace of Christ. One might think that certainly we will read about election in that book. Calvin has a chapter on the Holy Spirit. There is a long chapter on faith. There is a chapter on sanctification, which curiously is before the chapter on justification—although it is for another good reason that I will not explain. There is more on the Christian life and a long chapter on prayer. Finally, Calvin does present election.

Why does Calvin put election in such a strange place, toward the end of Book III, after prayer? I describe it this way: Calvin gets the person saved first. Then Calvin gets the person on his or her knees praying. Then Calvin slips in the answer to the question of where the person's faith comes from. He answers the question of who really saves the person. The answer is that God does. God gives faith. God saves. By limiting the discussion of election in that way, Calvin was able to avoid the controversy. It was no longer part of Book I, in the doctrine of God, which might allow people to say, "I do not like that." After the change, it is for the Christian to give glory to God and be humble in the presence of God. We recognize that our faith and our salvation is a gift of God. It is not of works, lest any of us should boast. In the *Institutes*, the doctrine of election serves specifically and only that one question, "Where did my faith come from?"

You might want to remember that as you teach the doctrines of the Bible, or even the Westminster Confession, which puts the doctrine much earlier than Calvin put it in the *Institutes*. All of his life, Calvin was concerned not only with the content but also with the order. Calvin realized that order is very important for teaching. People can be ready to learn some things but not be ready to learn other things until they have learned something else first. Calvin wanted to keep that order correctly. Thus as you read the *Institutes* it is a wonderful study, not only in the content of theology, but also in how to present theology, how to teach it, and when to teach it.

Next I want to describe some of the characteristics of the *Institutes*. There are a number of words that I use to comment on this wonderful book. The first word is "biblical." I do not just say that is first because

I am a Calvinist and I like the *Institutes* and I want Calvin to be biblical. Calvin wanted to be biblical. Calvin's most recent translator, Dr. Battles, has said, "Calvin is a scriptural theologian first, and a user of philosophy and logic and rhetoric, all human tools of organization, only second." Calvin used all of those things, but Scripture was indeed first. Calvin's use of Scripture was astounding. As you read the *Institutes* you will find almost 7000 quotations or references to Scripture. Calvin did not include them as mere decoration, just to have long lists of references after something he had stated. He used Scripture sensitively, wisely, and with an understanding of context. When Calvin mentions Scripture, it is almost always appropriate to the issue that he is discussing. John. T. McNeill said, "His readiness in bringing Scripture passages to bear upon each point of argument is astonishing and has perhaps never been surpassed." I have a curious picture of Calvin that relates to his posthumous fame, but also to the point I am making now. The picture is a drawing of Calvin in which all of the lines of the drawing are Scripture verses written in fine print. That is a strange way of drawing somebody's picture, but in the case of Calvin it is not an inappropriate way, because that is what Calvin wanted in his theology. R. C. Reed, a Southern Presbyterian theologian who taught at the old Columbia Seminary in the last century, wrote a sentence in a wonderful little book called *The Gospel According to Calvin*, "He was a wholesale plagiarist, from Moses and David, Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jesus and John, Peter and Paul." Scripture flowed into the *Institutes*.

The second word that describes a characteristic of the *Institutes* is "systematic." Dr. Warfield wrote, "As a systematizer, he makes his greatest demand on our admiration and gratitude." I already commented on how Calvin worked hard to get the order right, but I will say a few more words about it. Calvin's concern was to be orderly. He wanted to follow an order of teaching. It was quite different from Melancthon's *Loci Communes*. We get the impression that Melancthon had many file folders in which he put many things and one just happened to follow the other. Perhaps that is a somewhat severe assessment, and Lutherans may not like that statement. Yet even Lutherans have to acknowledge that Melancthon did not have the ability that Calvin had in arranging theology in an orderly fashion.

What you do not find in the *Institutes*, however, even though many people think it is there, especially people who have not read the *Institutes*, is an iron-clad logical system that brings everything into an order. Some people believe that Calvin would bend the facts to fit his logic. One does not have to read much in the *Institutes*, however, only a page or two, in order to see that that is wrong. There is a concern for order and arrangement. There is a careful tracing out of biblical themes. In doing that, however, Calvin advocated what he called "learned ignorance." That is where we end up. After we have done all that we can do, and after we have read all of the *Institutes*, or finished seminary, we will end up as people who are learned but ignorant. That may seem discouraging, but it is true. Calvin said we can go only so far, even with Scripture, and we must not go beyond Scripture. His image for going beyond Scripture is the labyrinth, the maze. Once you go beyond Scripture, you will find yourself in a labyrinth, and you will not get out. So when Calvin deals with biblical doctrines, he goes as far as he can go, but he will not go any further. He did not force doctrines together into a logical system. He considered the doctrine of God's sovereignty, and he took it as far as he could go with Scripture. He considered the doctrine of human responsibility, and he took that as far as he could go with Scripture. Once he developed both of those teachings as fully as he could according to Scripture, he did not press them together in some sort of logical way. He let them stand as they are. I like to describe it by saying that he sang the "Doxology" then. He usually quoted Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"

The third word that describes the *Institutes* is the word "devotional." Someone might again object and say that "devotional" is a strange word to use to talk about Calvin's *Institutes*. Let me again suggest that such a person read the first couple of pages. You do not have to go far into it before you realize that

Warfield was right when he said, “It is not the head, but the heart, which Calvin primarily addresses in his theology.” In the first edition of the *Institutes*, the original subtitle was “The whole sum of piety and whatever it is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation.” Thomas Aquinas called his great work *Summa Theologiae*, which means “Sum of Doctrine,” or “Sum of Theology.” Calvin called his work “Sum of Piety,” *Summa pietatis*. It was the sum of devotion, what we need to know to love and serve God in our lives. Calvin began the 1559 edition, the final edition, by writing, “Unless we establish our complete happiness in God, we will never give ourselves truly and sincerely to Him.” That is what I mean by devotional. It is true that Calvin makes great demands upon our minds. In his understanding of things, we love God with our minds, and we must think sincerely and truly. We must study, for that is loving God too. There is no dichotomy between theology and piety in the *Institutes*.

As we read through the *Institutes* we realize that once Calvin brings us as far as he can bring us scripturally with a doctrine, he will tell us that if we can go further then we should. He tells us that he has done the best he can, but others may be able to understand more. Consider, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity, with its mystery, and the difficulty that our finite minds have in comprehending even what the Scriptures begin to say about God. Regarding the doctrine of God, Calvin says in Book I, chapter five, “It is a doctrine which we ought more to adore than to meticulously search out.” So there is a place in theology where we stop and worship. Consider also the doctrine of election. Calvin is famous for teaching about the doctrine of election. Some people think he invented it, but he did not. Luther taught it. Augustine taught it. Paul taught it. It is in the Old Testament. Calvin finally says in Book III, when he has said all he can say about it, “God would have us revere but not understand, that through this also He should fill us with wonder.” One of the great doctrinal issues of the sixteenth century was the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. It separated Catholics and Lutherans and the Reformed. Calvin has a long and detailed study of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. He ends it this way, “Therefore nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.”

A final word that describes Calvin’s *Institutes* is “practical.” I have hinted at this point already, but I will say more about it. One of the most striking characteristics of Calvin’s work as a theologian is his synthesis of the work of an exegete, a systematic theologian, a preacher, and a pastor. You get it all, and you get it in one book. In God’s providence, Calvin was all of those things. It was not Calvin’s plan to be all of those things. He wanted to be a scholar in an ivory tower somewhere and not be bothered with the problems of city life in Geneva and a big church. God had other plans for him. If Calvin had ended up in the ivory tower, he would have written the *Institutes*, but it would not have been the same book that we have. It would not have been a better book. The better book is the one Calvin wrote. As T. H. L. Parker said, “Calvin’s *Institutes* was written not in an ivory tower but against the background of teething troubles and babies crying.” Calvin’s own child died early, but there were many children that Calvin took in from his relatives. He had family who lived with him. His house was always full of noise and uproar, and a baby was always crying. Calvin had to concentrate in the midst of all of that and write. The troubles from the church were also always pressing in upon him. He experienced the difficulties of being a Christian leader in a city that needed much teaching. There were controversies in the church. There were troubles at every turn and, like Paul, Calvin was constantly being buffeted by these things. Yet he went on writing, and because he wrote in that context, what he wrote is what we have in the *Institutes*.

There is no major theological work in all of history that is freer from technical theological words and expressions as Calvin’s *Institutes*. If you want a startling example of that, read Thomas’ *Summa* and then read Calvin’s *Institutes*. The *Summa* is a wonderful work, but you will have to get your dictionary out, and you will have to work hard to understand what even the titles of each chapter mean. With Calvin,

you will have to think, stay awake, and be alert, but you will not need a theological encyclopedia in order to read what Calvin says. Calvin was not a scholastic, like Thomas Aquinas; he was a street-corner theologian, like Paul. In the *Institutes* you encounter a street-corner theologian at work.

One of the ideas that Calvin used repeatedly, which illustrates this point, is the concept of accommodation. At least 41 times that word or idea appears in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. Calvin explains what he means by that, saying, “Scripture proceeds at the pace of a mother stooping to her child, so to speak, so as to leave us behind in our weakness.” God talks baby-talk to us in the Bible. God accommodates Himself to our weakness. God could have given us a Bible that none of us could understand. Yet He gave us a Bible full of stories and parables. Even though there are some things such as the book of Revelation that certainly challenge us, there is still so much that we can understand. Calvin’s point is that if God is like that, if He accommodates Himself to our weakness in giving us a Bible like that, which is God’s baby-talk, then we must be like that, too, in our teaching. It is altogether possible for a seminary student to say things that nobody will understand. You could preach sermons that nobody would be able to know what you are talking about. You may be saying things that are wonderful and precious, but they must be accommodated to the people to whom God is sending you. Not everybody whom you serve will have been to seminary. Not everybody whom you serve will understand Greek and Hebrew. Not everybody whom you serve will have studied church history. Thus you have a difficult task ahead of you. It is much easier for me to teach church history to seminary students rather than to junior high school students. If we love the people, however, to whom we are sent to serve, then we will do the difficult work that Calvin urges us to do so that we can speak to them and so that they can understand the wonderful truths that we want to communicate. Calvin said in his commentary on Romans, “We must therefore consider what questions each is able to bear and accommodate our doctrine to the capacity of the individual.”

Calvin’s *Institutes* is a wonderful book, and I hope you will read it, not once in your life, but perhaps several times. I will end this lesson with a word from Calvin. “May the Lord grant that we may contemplate the mysteries of His heavenly wisdom with truly increasing devotion to His glory and to our edification.” Amen. The best way to read the *Institutes* is simply to start on page one and keep going. There are compendiums, in which you get certain selections from the *Institutes*, but you miss so much that way. I would emphasize that, in English, you should read the translation by Ford Lewis Battles, which is often referred to as the McNeill-Battles edition, in the Library of Christian Classics. There are two volumes in that work. Do not try to work through it in one of the older nineteenth-century translations.

One question about the *Institutes* is why Calvin put the doctrine of sanctification before the doctrine of justification. I believe it was due to the polemical context in which he was writing. Many people were saying that Protestants did give much importance to love and obedience. Calvin wanted to startle his readers by leading with faith and then showing what faith produces in our lives. We love the Lord and we love our neighbors. Once he has that in his readers’ minds, he feels free to write about justification, which is out-of-order logically. Yet his order shows a concern for teaching. Calvin believed that many people, when they moved from faith to justification, might not go any further. He wanted to show a link between the Holy Spirit, who gives us faith, and the result in our lives. Then if his readers continued for another chapter he would teach on justification. That is my understanding of his reasoning, and other people may have a different view. It is rather surprising that Calvin was not greatly concerned about what we call the *ordo salutis*. He was somewhat concerned about it, but did not feel bound to always teach things in the same order. That does not mean he thought sanctification comes before justification. It meant that in his teaching in his context it was better to do it this way.

In the same way that Calvin did not make significant changes to the *Institutes*, he also did not make significant changes to the Geneva Confession. Any changes he made in the Confession were like the ones he made in the *Institutes*. He did not change the theology. We can see quite a difference, however, between Calvin's earlier efforts at catechisms and a confession for the Geneva church in his first stay, and what he did after returning from Strasbourg. What happened was that Calvin came into Geneva in his twenties, and he had never done anything like that before, and he was a smart man, and he was not naturally patient, and so he expected too much. His early writings about what people were supposed to learn, memorize, and understand seem far advanced compared to his later writings. Later on he was able to accommodate his teaching to the level of the people. He did not do that at first. It took the Strasbourg years to teach him that lesson.

It has been asked if Calvin's doctrine of election was a distinctive teaching of his in his own time or if it has been viewed by later scholars as a distinctive mark. Let me begin responding to that question by saying that there are two things that people think they know about Calvin when they do not really know much about him. That includes scholars, university professors, and important people who write books. One is that Calvin burned Servetus. The second is that he created a horrible doctrine called predestination. I already explained about the burning of Servetus. It was indeed tragic and sad, and there is not much more we can say about it except that it was wrong. Calvin was implicated in it. Regarding the second point, however, it must be said that Calvin did not create the doctrine of predestination. Luther had taught it in much the same way in his *Bondage of the Will*. Both Luther and Calvin were getting the teaching from Augustine, who got it out of Paul.

Calvin was more organized in his teaching about predestination. He did teach what we call double predestination. He called it a "horrible doctrine," by which he did not mean that God is horrible, but rather that the doctrine itself is awesome, or it is something that we almost cannot handle. Yet he did not pull back from it. Some people do pull back from it. The question is should we pull back from it? Calvin did not think so. As I said, he did delay until Book III to teach about it, but when he gets there it is fully developed. He said everything that we know as Calvinism in that place. He also wrote books about it and preached sermons about it. It was not a minor point in Calvin's teaching, but it should function the way it functions in the *Institutes*, which is to give glory to God and cause us to be humble in the presence of God.

Calvin was so persistent and so clear that he gained a reputation as someone who was a teacher of election, which he was. The next question is did the Calvinists follow Calvin faithfully, or did they develop the doctrine further? I will not answer that yet, but I will talk about it in another lesson. Strangely enough, however, we do not think about Luther as the great teacher of election that he was. We do not think of Calvin as the great exponent of justification by faith that he was. John Gerstner used to give a lecture called "Luther, the great Calvinist." One could also give a lecture called "Calvin, the great Lutheran." So the doctrine of election was not a point of great difference among the first generation of Reformers.