

THE APPLICATION OF SELECTED
SUBJECTS FROM JOHN CALVIN'S
INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION
TO MODERN MINISTRY

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Preamble

The reading requirement for two credit hours of the course 541, Independent Study in Historical Theology, of 1,500 pages has been completed in Calvin's Institutes and related materials. This paper shall apply certain areas of interest within the Institutes to present day issues of ministry.

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Introduction

It is said that public figures, especially religious ones, suffer the most abuse. In the more than four centuries since his death, John Calvin's reputation has surely had the ecclesiastical public's eye for scrutiny, both from friend and foe. His theology has suffered hyper-extension by would-be sympathizers and as well, frontal attack by its opponents. Modern critics might point to something like the following 1547 rule of discipline as an example of Reformation demagoguery: "If anyone sings songs that are unworthy, dissolute or outrageous, or spin wildly around in the dance, or the like, he is to be imprisoned for three days, and then sent on to the Consistory."¹ But it must be remembered that Calvin did not live in the twentieth century, nor in America. When he lived, technology and Renaissance thinking were only still in embryonic form, and there was not a single European colony in North America. So, the task in preparing this paper has been first to try to get an initial grasp on the system of theology in Calvin's greatest work, the Institutes. Secondly, the purpose is to apply certain sections of interest in each of the Institutes' four books to modern issues of the Christian ministry and current theological discussions.

Initially it is clear that Calvin's theology is no easy system to encapsulate. Many volumes have been devoted

to the study of Calvin, and with Luther and Barth, he is manifestly among the greatest and most influential theologians of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. W. S. Reid notes that the Institutes "quickly became disseminated widely in many different translations to form, except in countries where Lutheranism dominated, the systematic theology of the Reformation. And it has endured to the present, as is indicated by the numerous scholarly editions which have appeared recently in English, French, Japanese and other tongues."²

The Institutes of the Christian Religion was originally published as a small book of six chapters in 1536, as a theological handbook for French Protestants. By its final definitive edition of 1559, it had been revised five times and had grown to four books, seventy-nine chapters, and some 1,521 pages (in the LCC English edition). F. L. Battles' "Introduction" to his Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin offers a helpful point in understanding Calvin's production of the work.

We may set out in a general way a factor of incalculable import in the shaping of the Institutes: Geneva itself. Calvin's long struggle to provide workable legal and administrative structures for his adopted city, and to make them work; his day-to-day pastoral round in the church, in the 'consistoire,' in the school; his wide correspondence beyond the limits of that city--these activities insured that the Institutes would increasingly become, from beginning to end, a work of truly pastoral theology.

And, in reading the Institutes (as in those of his Commentaries surveyed), the style is remarkably fresh, sounding (thanks

in part to Battles' translation) more of 19th than 16th century style. Calvin writes to his surroundings, to his opponents, to his flock. He is no mere academic monk. Indeed, the Institutes are autobiographical in a very real sense, and afford us "one man's passionate responses to the call of Christ."⁴

The Institutes are comprised of four books. Book One is prefaced by some 35 pages of introductory material by Calvin himself, and then the body is titled The Knowledge of God the Creator. It makes up 13.6% of the whole Institutes.

Book Two, entitled The Knowledge of God the Redeemer In Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel, comprises 20% of the whole.

Book Three, entitled The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow, comprise 31.7% of the whole.

Book Four, entitled The External Means or Aids By Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein, comprises the final 34.7% of the whole.

So, while Calvin was concerned with prolegomenal matters, his primary emphasis developed more in matters of soteriology and ecclesiology, the latter making up a full third of the Institutes. But Battles gives Calvin's basic purpose in producing the Institutes as being to draw Christians to the Scriptures.⁵

Finally, the dedicatory epistle by Calvin to Francis I is of interest. The letter prefaced the first edition of

the Institutes, and all other editions as well. It places Calvin, in his own perception, between Romanism and radical Anabaptism. He attempted to show that his party was truly catholic, truly faithful to the Scriptures and the patristic past.

Summary of Book I, Directed to the Present

Calvin begins his work on a philosophical note. Knowledge of the true God is dependent epistemologically on knowledge of ourselves, that is, that we are in a desparate and miserable state. Conversely, without the revelation of God, there can be no full knowledge of self. Therefore, man stands dependent on God to give him the full view of reality. To stand in the realest sense before God, is to revere Him. True godliness can come only in initial and continuing submission to the absolute sovereignty of God. While Calvin does have a noble view of man in the image of God--man is certainly not absolutely depraved. But the knowledge of God, planted in all men, has been either smothered or corrupted in man. Man is obstinate and proud, and apart from God's grace there can be no real piety in the world.

So, Calvin begins his theology with a mixture of epistomology and anthropology. He is not burdened here with other philosophical categories but begins quickly with men and their state before God.

Calvin "shines forth" in high relevance for today in his section on the divine wisdom evident in creation and in man. This is no small point of apologetics. Western culture seems bent, in the opinion of this writer, on burying this evidence under supposed naturalistic explanation. Calvin answers it as a confusion of Creator and creature. God still maintains his lordship over creation. Man seems bent on destroying it (pollution, nuclear abuse, overpopulation, etc.).

While his treatment of the need for Scripture is contemporary to his times, and deals with the particulars then, Calvin does address more timeless philosophical problems, "without Scripture we fall into error;" whether it be Gnosticism or Rosicrucianism. Calvin adds to the Reformation the need of the Holy Spirit to interpret Scripture, "God in person speaks in it," (I, VII, 4). He speaks of the Libertines who would, in his view, forsake Scripture in favor of the current inspiration of the Spirit, feeling that they have freed themselves from "the letter that kills." While probably few if any modern American charismatics would go this far, still the tendency exists today to elevate perceived "spiritual" experience over Scripture. Calvin offers an excellent line of reason against this (I, XI).

Also, Calvin's treatment of the Trinity is still helpful to us today, although his handling of it is basically a commentary on the concilliar decisions of a millenium earlier.

Finally, his treatment of the subject of God's providence is refreshing today in a fast-paced world, surrounded by complex events and circumstances. The fact that God preserves and rules the world by His sovereignty is a great comfort in view of the growing evidence of man's wickedness. Calvin notes that since man is the most eminent of God's creatures, the providential care of God is exercised above all towards him.⁶ Whoever said that Calvin's god was a "divine rapist" simply has read little of Calvin.

Summary of Book II, Directed to the Present

Since man's state of sinfulness does not change, the reflections of pious and learned men of all ages of the church are helpful, as they direct us to a better view of Christ, our Savior from sinfulness. Calvin's development of the doctrine of redemption was at once a polemic to Roman Catholic soteriology and a positive statement for teaching Protestants. His treatment of redemption is comprehensive and biblical, and seeks to show how Christ is fully mediator and savior. First however, he shows man's need for a savior. Christology and anthropology are joined in Calvin to show how God became man and how man, in Christ, can become godly. Luther did not systematize here to the degree that Calvin did.

Naturally, a key question that is raised on the subject of redemption has to do with the nature of free will.

The question was with Augustine, Calvin and us today, and is another universal theological problem, regardless of the age. It seems to surface periodically however, and Calvin dealt extensively in Book II with it. That man has a will, Calvin does not deny. What he does affirm is that the will is fully perverted, blinded and crooked. With Niesel, ". . . this does not mean that Calvin depicts the moral state of mankind only in the blackest colours . . . Calvin does not try to deny that real heroism is to be found amongst men."⁷ The fact is that sin is more than moral failure. It is the predisposition and inclination to rebellion against God before moral failure, which in turn proves to be a helpless and hopeless state. Man's will is not immune from this. Fortunately, God's dominion stands above man's freedom, according to Calvin (Prov. 20:12; 21:1). The question of "free will" does not depend on whether man can accomplish what he will, but whether he can act freely. Calvin then anticipates (as he does throughout the Institutes) the objections (or some, at least) to his argument. Of course, modern theological opponents might champion more sophisticated objections today. Nonetheless, the body of Calvin's treatment on the will and God's overall plan of redemption stands both as useful and reliable. Again, his desire was to be faithful to Scripture alone, and to minister to his people. His dealing with the Ten Commandments are another example of his wish to apply the Scripture to daily life.

For him, the law was given to foster hope of salvation in Christ, not merely to restrain the people (II, VII). He sought clearly to apply the law for his people in the same way, not to dampen men, but to turn their hearts to Christ. We could use more of this emphasis in the Body of Christ today.

Summary of Book III, Directed to the Present

What could be a more practical-minded title for a treatise on theology than the title of this Book? "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow." After relating the importance of the secret working of the Holy Spirit, and some general pneumatology, Calvin proceeds to the subject of faith. This is no easy question. Surely today it is not completely settled, and Calvin's treatment is very fresh. What we would call "mere intellectual assent," Calvin speaks to when he says, ". . . that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them," (III, II, 16). The ensuing sections deal well with faith in the struggle against temptation, the conflict in the heart of the believer, weak faith, etc. These subjects are born out of Calvin's own sensitivity to the matter of faith, and are not merely scholastic speculations, although he does deal with scholastic objections

to faith. He concluded that the basis of faith was the free promise of grace in Christ given in the Word of God. No exposé could be more contemporary.

Repentance is another vital subject in this Book on which Calvin writes, that repentance is the fruit of faith (III, III). Within this section, he deals with sinless perfection, speaking to what he perceived to be Anabaptist antinomianism. While the main issues of perfectionism are dealt with, one would wish for more definition from Calvin on this point.

In dealing with the subject of confession, Calvin offers a more healthy (and biblical) view than did the Roman Catholics of his day. He sees a place in Christian public worship for general confession, placing it at the beginning of the service. The purpose is to pray for forgiveness of course, but also to shake off our complacency and sluggishness.⁸ Also, there is the proper place for private confession, made for our own sake (for mutual counsel and consolation), and made for our neighbor's sake (for reconciliation and making up to him for any injuries). This is an excellent section. In our Protestant zeal, we have perhaps de-emphasized this too much, where its practice in a biblical way would prove healing to the Body, and pleasing to the Lord.

Of course almost all of Calvin's sections in the Institutes dealing with other Roman Catholic practices are

helpful in understanding and ministering to modern Roman Catholics, even though Roman Catholicism today is so broad.

Calvin makes some distinctive contributions (which are still helpful today) to the discussion of justification. Calvin's basic definition is good: "We explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives into his favour as righteous men," (III, XI, 2). But then Calvin offers a secondary sense to justification: first is the imputation of righteousness, and second, and in consequence, is the declaration or manifestation before men of the righteousness of faith. This, says Bromiley, is justification by works.⁹ But this is not faith as a human work; it is derived from the Holy Spirit, as a means of appropriation, not merit. Finally, justification and sanctification are brought together, viewing "the Christian life in its totality, not in its isolated constituents."¹⁰ This sounds much like Calvin's Presbyterian heirs, of a century later, who write:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon and renew their faith and repentance.¹¹

Bromiley notes, "if justification is not to be swallowed up in sanctification or confused with it, sanctification is not to be reduced to justification or replaced by it."¹² Calvin's exposé on the Christian life is very relevant for today, particularly with the development of Wesleyan and Holiness emphases in the past two hundred years.

We note here also, that Calvin's section on Christian freedom (III, XIX) is helpful, and refreshing in the light of some excesses in the area of the law propogated by some modern evangelicals.

Book III also offers in Chapter XX, seventy pages on the subject of prayer. This is not usually dealt with within the confines of modern systematics (although it should be), but offers another evidence that Calvin's theology was born out of his own Christian life and struggle, and out of his ministry. Calvin calls prayer the chief exercise of faith, and the chapter is one of the most warmly devotional in the Institutes--would that it would be printed and distributed today in a more popular format!

Summary of Book IV, Directed to the Present

To this writer, Book IV is of great interest, because in this final section, Calvin deals extensively, theologically and practically with ecclesiology. On the one hand he offers the lofty idea of a visible and an invisible church (IV, I, 7-9), and on the other, such details on practical subjects like fasting and church constitutions. He goes to great length to delineate the true Body of Christ from falsely Christian assemblies, and to justify the Protestant cause in a Roman Catholic world. While the Book's context is the Reformation from the church of Rome, it is punctuated with numerous timeless aspects of ecclesiology beneficial to twentieth-century evangelicals. Calvin has reawakened the

subject of ecclesiology, and in the opinion of this writer, taken it far beyond Luther and Zwingli. Calvin began Reformed thinking in this area, resulting in the Reformed proposition that the unity and holiness of the Church are not found only in the objective ordinances of the Church, or in its offices and sacraments alone, but also in the subjective communion of believers.¹³ This expansion and application of the idea of the invisible church also had its distinctive impact on the government and discipline of the church.

Also, Calvin's emphasis on the avoidance of schism was new to his century (and helpful in ours). He is surprisingly gracious here, and like Bullinger, does not think that there is any good cause for leaving a church that "cherishes the true ministry of word and sacrament." Unwarranted separation is warned against as the "denial of God and Christ." Disagreement on non-essential doctrines is no good reason for separation.¹⁴ We would do well today to heed these words. We all suffer from ignorance at times and we must count this in our evaluation of fellowship.

Finally, the sections on baptism and the Lord's table are distinctive, and interesting. They form the heart of Presbyterian distinction today (along with polity), and are intriguing and progressive.

Concluding Remarks

John Calvin wrote his Institutes of the Christian Religion over a period of 23 years (1536-1559). The work grew as he grew in his understanding and experience. But his thought is consistent, and he is typical of the kind of theologian whose thinking takes a certain shape near the beginning of his career and roughly remains so. Battles offers that the Institutes are for man a handbook of Christian piety, and to God, a "bold effort truly to crown God as king of His people . . . that God may rule among the nations." God is king, He should be worshipped as such. Calvin's theology lives in a real world, where theology and law meet in daily life. He offers much to the supposedly sophisticated twentieth-century American. It is the hope of this writer that his works will experience a renaissance of popularity in coming years.

NOTES

- ¹from "Ordinances for the Supervision of Churches in the Country, February 3, 1547" published in Calvin: Theological Treatises, edited by J. K. S. Reid.
- ²from W. S. Reid's article on Calvin in the New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, edited by J. D. Douglas.
- ³Ford Lewis Battles, Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin, p. 14.
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 24.
- ⁶Wilhelm Niesel, The Theology of Calvin, 1980 (1938), p. 73.
- ⁷Ibid, p. 88.
- ⁸In his Strasbourg Liturgy (1539), and in that of Geneva (1542), Calvin employed a form of confession of sins that was employed by Martin Bucer, (III, IV, 12, note 22).
- ⁹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Historical Theology, An Introduction, (1978) p. 236.
- ¹⁰Ibid, p. 237.
- ¹¹The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XI, section V.
- ¹²Bromiley, p. 238.
- ¹³Louis Berkhof, The History of Christian Doctrines, (1937), p.238.
- ¹⁴Bromiley, pp. 266, 267.