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A Reader's Guide to



CALVIN'S  
*Institutes*

Anthony N. S. Lane



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# Abbreviations

§/§§	section/sections
bk./bks.	book/books
MB	McNeill-Battles translation of the 1559 edition of Calvin's <i>Institutes</i> (published by Westminster, 1960)
n./nn.	note/notes
p./pp.	page/pages
par./pars.	paragraph/paragraphs
sent./sents.	sentence/sentences

## How to Use This Book

Calvin's *Institutes* is one of the great classics of Christian theology. This volume is designed as a guide to reading it in the McNeill-Battles translation (hereafter, MB). It is not a book to be read in its own right but functions purely as a reading guide. There are many other books about Calvin in general and about the *Institutes* in particular, but none of these actually guides the reader through a reading of the text, with direction as to the key sections to read. The notes are almost entirely devoted to expounding the *Institutes*, but I do occasionally discuss how the teaching might apply to today and also occasionally offer critical comments.

This volume guides the reader specifically through MB in that there are numerous references to the wording of this translation, to specific pages and paragraphs, and to the footnotes. Where there is, below, a simple reference to “p. *x*” or “n. *y*,” this refers to the relevant page or footnote in this translation. This volume could be used in conjunction with a different translation of the *Institutes*, but a significant amount of material would then no longer be relevant.

The *Institutes* is divided into thirty-two portions, in addition to Calvin's introductory material. From each of these an average of some eighteen pages has been selected to be read. These selections are designed to cover the whole range of the *Institutes*, to cover all of Calvin's positive theology, while missing most of

his polemics against his opponents and most of the historical material. My notes concentrate on the sections chosen for reading but also contain brief summaries of the other material.

Readers have four options:

1. Read only the selected material and my brief summaries of the rest.
2. Read only the selected material and use Battles's *Analysis of the Institutes*<sup>1</sup> as a summary of the rest.
3. Concentrate on the selected material but skim through the rest.
4. Read the whole of the *Institutes*.

The notes guide the reader through the text and also draw attention to the most significant footnotes in the Battles edition. At the beginning of each portion is an introduction and a question or questions to focus the mind of the reader.

For those who wish to read further, many books expound the whole of Calvin's theology, but I shall mention only three.

F. Wendel's *Calvin* (London: Collins, 1963) was originally written in French in 1950. Even after more than half a century, this remains arguably the best general introduction to Calvin, with a brief account of his life and of the development of the *Institutes*, together with a superb account of his theology.

T. H. L. Parker's *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), is especially relevant for our present purposes since it sets out to expound the theology of the *Institutes* in particular, rather than Calvin's thought in general.

C. Partee's *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) is a substantial exposition of Calvin's theology. It is the latest addition to the genre and a worthy one.

1. F. L. Battles, *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

# John Calvin and His *Institutes*

John Calvin was born in 1509 at Noyon, in northern France.<sup>1</sup> He studied at Paris, Orleans, and Bourges universities and became an admirer of Erasmus and humanism. In 1532 he produced a work of humanist scholarship, a commentary on the Roman philosopher Seneca's *Clemency*, which failed to make the impact for which he had hoped. At about this time, Calvin was converted to the Protestant cause. In his own words:

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.<sup>2</sup>

He immediately devoted himself to theological study. In 1533, he was associated with a mildly Protestant speech given by the new rector of the University of Paris, Nicholas Cop. Calvin had to leave town in a hurry. The following year a number

1. The first section, on Calvin's life and works, is drawn heavily from my *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (London: T&T Clark [Continuum], 2006), 174–78, for which the publishers have kindly granted permission.

2. J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. J. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:xl ("Author's Preface").

of “Placards” attacking the Roman Mass were posted around Paris—one on the door of the royal bedchamber, if the report is to be believed. The king, Francis I, was furious and launched a vigorous onslaught on the Evangelicals. Calvin left France and settled in Basel to study and to write. By the summer of 1535, he had finished the first edition of his *Institutes*. But this peaceful period of scholarship was to be short. In 1536, he was on his way to Strassburg<sup>3</sup> when a local war forced him to make a detour through Geneva—the most fateful traffic diversion in European history, as has been said. Geneva had just accepted the Reformation, partly for political reasons. Calvin planned to spend only one night there, but William Farel, the leader of the Genevan Reformers, came to urge him to stay. As Calvin put it:

After having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, [Farel] proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.<sup>4</sup>

The city council noticed the employment of “that Frenchman.” Calvin ministered in Geneva from 1536 to 1538. But at this stage, he was still impetuous and immature. Conflict over the issue of church government led to his exile, and he withdrew to Basel to resume his studies. But again this was not to be. Martin Bucer urged him to come to Strassburg to minister to the small congregation of French refugees. Calvin resisted until Bucer took a leaf out of Farel’s book and threatened him with the example of Jonah. Calvin reluctantly gave way. Apart from poverty, his

3. Throughout this reader, I have used the German spelling for the city of Strassburg as a reminder that it was a German city in Calvin’s day.

4. *Ibid.*, xlii–xliii.

years at Strassburg were not unpleasant. He enjoyed his contact with Bucer and the other Reformers and profited greatly from it. He was able to take part in the colloquies between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the years 1539 to 1541, becoming well acquainted with Philipp Melancthon in the process. He also acquired a wife, the widow of a convert from Anabaptism. But while Calvin was at Strassburg, the church at Geneva was going from bad to worse. Eventually, in 1540, the magistrates in desperation asked Calvin to return. He was appalled, having earlier stated about the prospect of a return to Geneva, “I would prefer a hundred other deaths to that cross, on which I should have to die a thousand times a day.”<sup>5</sup> Yet after consideration, “a solemn and conscientious regard to my duty prevailed with me to consent to return to the flock from which I had been torn—but with what grief, tears, great anxiety and distress I did this, the Lord is my best witness.”<sup>6</sup>

Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541. His fears were amply justified. There was to be a long and bitter struggle in which Calvin fought for the spiritual independence of the Genevan church and for the imposition of a rigorous discipline. The rules that he sought to impose (including regulation of dress and prohibition of dancing) were mostly traditional medieval laws. The novelty lay in his determination actually to enforce them and to do so on the *whole* of Genevan society, not exempting the ruling classes. For many years, Calvin had to face intense opposition from the magistrates, but eventually his opponents were discredited, and there was a pro-Calvin city council. In the final years of his life, he was highly respected, though his wishes were not always obeyed. He died in 1564.

Calvin has not had a good press. In 1559 he claimed that “there is no one who is assailed, bitten, and wounded by more false accusations than I” (MB, p. 4). These words were to be more prophetic than he could have realized. He is blamed for the doctrine of predestination, so clearly taught by Augustine,

5. Cited in F. Wendel, *Calvin* (London: Collins, 1963), 67.

6. Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, xliv (“Author’s Preface”).

by most medieval theologians, and by all the Reformers. It is true that Calvin heightened it somewhat, but no more than had some medieval theologians, such as Bradwardine. He is vilified for his part in the execution of the heretic Servetus (for denying the doctrine of the Trinity)—although his contemporaries applauded him almost to a man and although many of those considered saintly today (such as Thomas More) persecuted heretics more fiercely than did Calvin. Calvin must be judged against the background of his times. He is accused of being the “dictator of Geneva”—while even at the height of his power, his authority was primarily moral rather than legal, and he even had to seek the approval of the city council before publishing his books. Of course he was not perfect. Calvin acknowledged that he suffered from a bad temper. He was intolerant, assuming too readily that opposition to *his* teaching was opposition to *God’s Word*—a fault shared by many others then and now. To some extent Calvin’s ill repute is the fault of his disciples, who often upset the careful balance of his theology by making the doctrine of predestination central and foundational whereas Calvin was careful to keep it in its place.

Calvin transformed Geneva. The Scots Reformer John Knox declared it to be “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places, I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion so sincerely reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place.”<sup>7</sup> This was the result of Calvin’s rigorous discipline. For those who disliked it, Calvin suggested that if they did not want to live under the yoke of Christ, they should build another city where they could live as they wished. It was also the result of a massive influx of French and other refugees into the tiny city, drawn mostly by their admiration of Calvin. Calvin’s primary concern was for his homeland (France), and many who came to Geneva returned to pastor the growing number of French Protestant churches. Calvin founded an academy to train them,

7. J. Ridley, *John Knox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 215.

the precursor of the modern university of Geneva, drawing upon the educational pattern that he had seen in Strassburg.

Calvin claimed, with some justice, that “by nature I love brevity” (MB, p. 685). Yet he was one of the most prolific writers in the history of the church. His output would have been remarkable for a full-time scholar, yet Calvin fitted it into a schedule that would have exhausted two lesser men. Apart from his many responsibilities at Geneva, he was the most important leader of the international network of Reformed churches. His letters fill many large volumes, and a list of their recipients would read like a *Who’s Who* of Reformation Europe.

Calvin wrote many polemical treatises. Several of these were directed against Anabaptism. More important were his attacks on Roman Catholicism. In 1539, after Calvin had been exiled from Geneva, Cardinal Sadolet wrote to the Genevans, urging them to return to the Roman fold. The letter was forwarded to Calvin, who (in a mere six days) wrote a *Reply to Sadolet*, one of his best works. He also published the *Acts* of the early sessions of the Council of Trent—with an *Antidote*. Calvin was capable of satire as biting as any from Erasmus, as can be seen from his *Admonition in Which It Is Shown How Advantageous for Christendom Would Be an Inventory of the Bodies and Relics of Saints*, known as the *Treatise on Relics*.

Against his will, Calvin also found himself forced to write against Lutherans. After he reached his 1549 *Zurich Agreement* with Bullinger on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, two Lutheran pastors, Westphal and Hesshusius, attacked him, and Calvin responded. The controversy grieved him because he saw himself as a disciple of Luther. Not all of Calvin’s treatises were polemical. One of the finest is a *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, which sets out his teaching in a conciliatory fashion, as the middle way between Zwingli and Luther. Luther himself is reported to have spoken appreciatively of it.

Calvin preached regularly throughout his time at Geneva. From 1549, his sermons were recorded in shorthand. A number were published in the sixteenth century, but the majority remained in the Genevan library in shorthand form. Incredibly,

these were sold off by weight in 1805, and three-quarters of them are lost. Those that survive are now being published.

Calvin wrote commentaries on many of the books of the Bible: Genesis to Joshua, Psalms, all of the prophets except Ezekiel 21–48, and all of the New Testament except 2 and 3 John and Revelation. These commentaries were often based on earlier sermons or lectures. Calvin’s commentaries are among the very few written before the nineteenth century that are still of value for understanding the meaning of the text (as opposed to those that might be read today for edification rather than for the light that they shed on the text of the Bible). He is the only writer ever to belong without question both to the first rank of theologians *and* to the first rank of commentators.

Calvin is best known for his *Instruction in the Christian Religion* (commonly called the *Institutes*). Written in Latin, it went through five major editions, listed below. He was revising it for most of his literary and pastoral life. Like Augustine, he was one of those who write as they learn and learn as they write (MB, p. 5).<sup>8</sup>

## Editions of the *Institutes*

### *1536 Edition*

This was probably completed by August 23, 1535, the date of the “Prefatory Address.” It was published the following March in Basel, in a pocketbook format. It was roughly as long as the section of the New Testament from Matthew to Ephesians. There were six chapters. Four cover the law, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments (baptism and Lord’s Supper)—the traditional components of a catechism. The other two chapters—on the false (Roman Catholic) sacraments and on Christian liberty—were more polemical in tone, as was the “Prefatory Address to King Francis I.”

8. For more on the editions of the *Institutes*, see pp. xxix–xxxviii; Wendel, *Calvin*, 111–22, 144–49; R. A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chaps. 6–7. For the meaning of the word *Institutio*, see p. xxxi, n. 3.

### *1539 Edition*

This was nearly completed by October 1, 1538, and was published the following August in Strassburg. It was nearly three times as long as the first edition, the six chapters having become seventeen. It was a thorough revision of the first edition, and the title page states that it “now, at last corresponds to its title.” There was a French translation, which appeared in 1541, published in Geneva but aimed at the French market. This was a major event in the history of the French language: the appearance in French of a major theological work. Calvin’s elegant French style played an important formative role in the development of French as a modern language. This and later French editions showed Calvin’s concern to reach not just the intelligentsia but also the laity.

### *1543 Edition*

This less radical revision was published in March 1543, at Strassburg. It was nearing completion in January 1542. Thus, though it was completed in Geneva, it reflects the influence of Calvin’s three years at Strassburg, which ended in September 1541. The seventeen chapters of 1539 had become twenty-one. Again there was a French translation, which appeared in 1545.

### *1550 Edition*

This edition appeared early in 1550 at Geneva. The main new feature was the division of the chapters into sections. There was a French translation, which appeared the following year.

### *1559 Edition*

During the winter of 1558/59 Calvin lay ill with malaria yet determined to produce a definitive edition of the *Institutes*. This appeared in September 1559, at Geneva. In this edition Calvin added more material and thoroughly rearranged the book. He tells us that though he did not regret the earlier editions, he had never been satisfied with the arrangement until this edition. This

edition is about 25 percent longer than the 1550 edition. It is roughly as long as Genesis to Luke, inclusive. It now consists of eighty chapters divided among four books. The four books correspond to the four sections of the Apostles' Creed, but this is a formal arrangement, and it is wrong to see the work as an exposition of the creed. The resurrection comes at the end of book 3, far from its position in the creed. There was a French translation, which appeared in 1560. Because this appeared after the final Latin edition, some regard it as the truly definitive version, but that is to mistake the role of the French translations. The Latin is the definitive text, and the translations at times simplify it in order to make it more accessible to nonscholars.

The *Institutes* has been printed often, and in a wide variety of languages. Both the 1536 and the 1559 editions are found in the *Opera Selecta Joannis Calvinii*, edited by P. Barth and W. Niesel. The 1536 edition appears in volume 1 but is not as reliable as it should be.<sup>9</sup> The 1559 edition appears in volumes 3 to 5.<sup>10</sup> This is a thoroughly reliable critical edition. The 1539 edition has been published together with a concordance.<sup>11</sup>

The 1536 *Institutes* has been translated into English by F. L. Battles and twice published.<sup>12</sup> There are four English translations of the 1559 *Institutes*: by Thomas Norton, Thomas Cranmer's son-in-law (1561);<sup>13</sup> by John Allen (1813);<sup>14</sup> by Henry Bever-

9. J. Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, ed. P. Barth (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926), 1:11–283. For its inadequacies, see W. G. Hards, *A Collation of the Latin Texts of the First Edition of Calvin's Institutes* (Baltimore: [self-published at Cathedral of the Incarnation], 1958).

10. J. Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel, vols. 3–5 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1928, 1931, 1936, and further editions).

11. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin, 1539: Text and Concordance*, ed. R. F. Wevers (Grand Rapids: H. H. Meeter Center, 1988).

12. J. Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion . . .*, trans. F. L. Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975); J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion . . .*, trans. F. L. Battles, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans with H. H. Meeter Center, 1986).

13. J. Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion* (London: R. Wolffe & R. Harrison, 1561), and many reprints.

14. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: J. Walker, J. Hatchard, 1813), and many reprints.

idge (1845);<sup>15</sup> and by Ford Lewis Battles (1960).<sup>16</sup> The last two are still in print and available electronically,<sup>17</sup> the latter having the advantage of a superior layout, full notes, and extensive indexes.<sup>18</sup>

## The Purpose of the *Institutes*

Calvin's aims in preparing the successive editions of the *Institutes* can be discerned by an examination of their title pages and prefaces.

The title page of the 1536 edition is revealing:

Embracing almost the whole sum of piety and whatever is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety.

This was meant to be a brief summary of the Christian faith, with the goal of edification. This end is served especially by the first four chapters, modeled on the catechism. But before it appeared, there was need for another type of work. The Affair of the Placards (October 17–18, 1534) unleashed the fury of King Francis I against the French Protestants. Francis sought to justify his brutal repression on the grounds that they were seditious Anabaptists, grounds enough for most people at the time. Calvin therefore dedicated the 1536 edition to Francis as a confession of faith and as an apology for the French Protestants.

15. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–46), and many reprints.

16. J. Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

17. On the CD *John Calvin Collection* (Rio, WI: AGES Library, 1998). The CD has all the material from MB, but the pagination is different so many of the references in the present volume will be of no use.

18. There have also been a number of abridgements of the *Institutes*, such as J. Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. T. Lane and H. Osborne (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1986; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), and many reprints. The passages selected for that abridgement are closely related to the readings selected in the present volume.

This purpose is seen most clearly in the “Prefatory Address” to the king; see especially pp. 9–10.<sup>19</sup>

In his *Letter to the Reader* at the beginning of the 1539 edition, Calvin explains how the *Institutes* should be used. It is intended as an introduction and guide to the study of Scripture and to complement his commentaries. Because of the *Institutes*, Calvin need not digress at length on doctrinal matters in his commentaries (pp. 4–5). This warns us against falling into the common error of viewing Calvin as “a man of one book”—the *Institutes*. The *Institutes* and the commentaries are designed to be used together: the *Institutes* to provide a theological undergirding for the commentaries, and the commentaries to provide a more solid exegesis of the passages cited in the *Institutes*. So when he gives a biblical reference in the *Institutes*, Calvin may be pointing not just to the biblical text itself, but also to his commentary on that passage.

The French editions from 1541 to 1551 contain an introduction titled *Subject Matter of the Present Work* (pp. 6–8). Here Calvin presents the *Institutes* as a guide to the laity in their study of the Bible. The Scriptures contain a perfect doctrine, to which nothing can be added, but the beginner needs guidance in order to study them profitably. The *Institutes* is offered for that purpose, as “a summary of Christian doctrine” and an introduction to the profitable reading of both the Old and New Testaments. The introductions to the various modern editions are also useful for background and orientation.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin’s *Institutes* is still widely read today, more so than any other major theological work of comparable age. This is in part because of Calvin’s great success in his aim of “lucid brevity”: covering a topic briefly, yet expressing clearly what he had to say. This makes his writing easier to read than most comparable works. It is also in part because of his great theological skills, which are appreciated even by those who may

19. Calvin also explains why he wrote this edition in his *Commentary on Psalms*, xli–xlii (“Author’s Preface”).

20. A helpful account of the 1536 edition is found in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), chap. 3.

differ from him on particular doctrines, be that infant baptism or predestination.

### The Structure of the 1559 *Institutes*

For the last century, Calvin scholars have been debating the structure of the 1559 *Institutes*, with a variety of theories about this.<sup>21</sup> Calvin himself gives us his own structure in the titles of the four books:

- Book 1. The Knowledge of God the Creator
- Book 2. The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ . . .
- Book 3. The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ . . .
- Book 4. The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ . . .

Scholars have developed a number of theories that propose a deeper underlying structure. Edward Dowey claimed, especially on the basis of a comment of Calvin in 1.2.1, that the basic structure of the *Institutes* is twofold: the knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, he sees the break between these two as coming partway through book 2.<sup>23</sup> It is true that there is this division in the *Institutes*, but to take it as the fundamental division and to divide the *Institutes* in a way that is so different from Calvin's own division is implausible. More plausibly, T. H. L. Parker argued that the *Institutes* is structured according to the four articles of the Apostles' Creed.<sup>24</sup> This has the merit that the contents of each book do roughly match this division, but not exactly. If following the creed, book 3 should be about the Holy Spirit, who is not mentioned in Calvin's title.

21. For more on this, see Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 35–43.

22. E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951; rev. ed., 1994), 41–49 (page numbers fit the rev. ed.).

23. *Ibid.*, 45: "Book II really begins only in chapter vi."

24. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969), 6.

On this schema, the final resurrection should come in book 4, whereas it actually comes at the end of book 3. So though there are indeed many parallels between the structure of the *Institutes* and that of the Apostles' Creed, if Calvin did intend to base his work upon it, one can only say that he made a bad job of it.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Charles Partee has proposed a twofold division between "God for Us" (books 1 and 2) and "God with Us" (books 3 and 4).<sup>26</sup> It is certainly true that the material fits this twofold division (as it also fits Dowey's twofold division of God as Creator and Redeemer), but that does not mean that Calvin intended either of these as his basic structure. Ultimately, it is Calvin's own structure that is normative, not the structures proposed by various scholars as underlying it.

25. The same applies even more to the suggestion of Philip Butin that the Trinity is the organizing or structural paradigm for the 1559 *Institutes*, though he does qualify this by referring to the Apostles' Creed (P. W. Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 19, 124). A division into four books does not immediately suggest a structure based on the Trinity.

26. Partee, *Theology of Calvin*, 40–43.

## Introduction to the Notes

The *Institutes* is divided into books, chapters, and sections. Thus 3.12.4 = book 3, chapter 12, section 4. (Books about Calvin sometimes use Roman numerals: III.xii.4.) In these notes, I will use the symbol § for section: §4 = section 4; §§5–6 = sections 5–6.

The *Institutes* went through five major editions, and different material was introduced by Calvin at different stages. The small letters *a–e* in MB tell you at which stage portions of the text were added. See pp. xxiv, xxvii for details. This reader's guide, however, is designed to help readers understand and appreciate the teaching of the definitive 1559 edition, not to trace material back to the different earlier editions. Only occasionally will mention be made of when material was first introduced into the *Institutes*.

The titles of the books and the chapters are from Calvin and are important. The section headings are *not* Calvin's. Some of them (e.g., 1.2.2) are followed by an asterisk or a dagger in MB. These symbols can be ignored, but see pp. xix–xx or xxvii if your curiosity gets the better of you. The titles of chapters in my notes are not usually Calvin's (which are often excessively long and ponderous) but are intended to be brief summaries of his titles.

The MB edition has many footnotes offering a wealth of information. The most significant ones are indicated in the notes below. Some readers may wish to read all of the MB footnotes, but you can safely ignore them except where either your curiosity or these notes point to them.

There is one major flaw in MB. Though it aims to be a faithful translation of Calvin's text, no such care has been taken with Calvin's references. So, when it comes to biblical references, the fact that a passage is cited in the text (in square brackets) is absolutely no guarantee that Calvin cited it or even had it in mind. By no means all of Calvin's biblical references are found in MB, and by no means all of the references found there are from Calvin. So it is totally unreliable as an indicator of Calvin's citation of Scripture. The same applies to Calvin's citation of patristic and medieval authors. There are many such marginal citations in Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*. These are (mostly) found in the footnotes to MB. Unfortunately the footnotes also contain numerous other such references not found in Calvin. So the reader has no way of knowing whether a reference to Chrysostom or Cyprian in the footnotes means that Calvin cited them or simply that the editor thought them relevant. A glance at the author index (pp. 1626–27) indicates that Thomas Aquinas is cited frequently in the footnotes. Some careless scholars have been misled by this into supposing that Calvin himself frequently referred to Thomas, while in fact Calvin names Thomas just four times in all his writings (two of these in the *Institutes*) and may never have read him.<sup>1</sup>

Our set reading does not include the whole of the *Institutes*. In my notes, I will give a brief indication of what we are leaving out, enclosed within square brackets [like this]. If you want more detail, you can adopt one of the strategies listed in “How to Use This Book,” above.

1. See A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 44–45.

# READING GUIDE

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# 1

## Introductory Material (Pp. 3–8; “Prefatory Address” §§1, 3–4, 6)

### Introduction

Calvin wrote an introductory “Letter to the Reader,” which is found in all of the Latin editions from 1539. In 1559 he modified part of this and added a new section. In the French editions from 1541 to 1551 was a corresponding item, and MB includes this as well.

Calvin dedicated the first edition (1536) to King Francis I of France. His “Prefatory Address” remains in all subsequent editions, with some additions. Its main purpose is to refute seven charges that had been brought against the Evangelicals.

### Questions

How did Calvin see the *Institutes* relating to Scripture and to his commentaries? How does Calvin answer the charge of novelty

(“Prefatory Address” §§3–4)? Where was the true church in the Middle Ages (“Prefatory Address” §6)?

### **Pp. 3–5. John Calvin to the Reader**

As can be seen from the small letters, this 1559 text is a revision of the 1539 *Letter to the Reader*. The superscript *b* at the beginning indicates that this is from 1539; the superscript *e(b)* near the end of the paragraph indicates that the following text, from 1539 material (*b*), was revised in 1559 (*e*). At the bottom of the page, the superscript *b* indicates that what follows is from 1539. The superscript *e* near the top of the next page indicates that what follows is from 1559, until the superscript *b* at the beginning of the last paragraph on that page, and so on. See pp. xxiv and xxvii for details.

The first paragraph is very important for the history of the different editions; especially see the next-to-last sentence. The 1559 edition was the first with which Calvin was really satisfied.

The second paragraph explains the circumstances behind the preparation of the 1559 edition. Its last sentence has turned out to be truer than Calvin could have realized.

The third paragraph is not important and can be ignored.

In the fourth paragraph, Calvin explains how the *Institutes* relates to his commentaries. In line 6 of p. 5, “Scripture” should be “my commentaries.”

### **Pp. 6–8. Subject Matter of the Present Work**

This comes from the 1541–51 French editions, *not* (as MB claims) the 1560 edition.

In the first paragraph, Calvin explains the relation between the Bible and the *Institutes*.

Scripture is perfect and sufficient but not so clear that we need no help in understanding it. This is the purpose of the French *Institutes*: to guide the (non-Latin-speaking) laity toward a clearer grasp of the teaching of Scripture. The last six lines of footnote 8 are of interest.

In the second paragraph, Calvin explains his motive for translating the *Institutes* into French. He is concerned for the whole

French *nation* (line 7). Calvin again explains (as in par. 4 of the Latin “Letter to the Reader”) the relation between the *Institutes* and his commentaries. Notice again, after the number for footnote 9, “the greatest possible brevity.”

In the third paragraph, Calvin gives some advice about how to read the *Institutes*. You may find the third sentence an encouragement!

**Prefatory Address.** Footnotes 1, 8, 12, 39, 44, and 45 are of interest.

**§1.** Calvin explains how the 1536 edition was written. Originally it was to have been a simple handbook of doctrine. But after the affair of the Placards<sup>1</sup> on October 17–18, 1534, Francis launched a bitter persecution of French Protestants. This led Calvin to dedicate the work to Francis as a confession of faith.

[§2. The Evangelicals base their teaching on Scripture and are persecuted; the Roman clergy fight for doctrines that have no scriptural basis.]

**§3.** In the first paragraph, Calvin outlines seven charges brought against the Evangelicals: (1) novelty, (2) uncertainty, (3) lack of miracles, (4) rejection of the early church fathers, (5) rejection of custom, (6) schism, (7) sedition. The rest of the “Prefatory Address” is devoted to answering these charges in turn.

The second and third paragraphs answer the charge of novelty. Calvin here responds by saying that his doctrine is as old as Scripture. This is all very well, but it does not meet the following charge, brought against Calvin by Cardinal Sadolet in 1539:

The point in dispute is, Whether [it is] more expedient for your salvation, and whether you think you will do what is more pleasing to God, by believing and following what

1. For details of this, see p. xxxi of MB and my introduction titled “John Calvin and His *Institutes*,” above.

the Catholic Church throughout the whole world, now for more than fifteen hundred years, or (if we require clear and certain recorded notice of the facts) for 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?<sup>2</sup>

Such a charge requires an appeal to more than Scripture, and this Calvin provides in §4. In the fourth paragraph, Calvin answers charge 2. Charge 3 is answered in the remaining paragraphs of §3, which are less important.

§4 answers charge 4 and thereby provides a further answer to the charge of novelty. Calvin's doctrine is not "new" (a damning charge when *all* agreed that "nothing new can be true") because it is scriptural *and* because it is in line with the teaching of the early fathers, before the church went astray. Essentially Calvin makes two claims in this section: the fathers do not support the Roman Catholic position *and* by and large they do support the Reformed position. Both claims come in the first paragraph. Calvin treats the fathers with respect, but they are not infallible: they must be tested by Scripture. They made mistakes, and Calvin accuses the Roman Catholics of following these and thus gathering dung amid gold.

In the following paragraphs, Calvin, like a defense lawyer, calls the fathers as witnesses for his case. There is no need to pay attention to the details; it is the overall effect that you should grasp.

In the final paragraph of §4, Calvin is very rude about the medieval scholastic theologians. These complaints were

2. H. Beveridge, ed., *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts*, Calvin Translation Society (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:14, from his 1539 letter to the Genevans. These words were written some four years later than Calvin's "Prefatory Address," but they have been quoted here because they express most succinctly the charge that Calvin then had to face.

also voiced by Roman Catholic humanists, such as Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly*.<sup>3</sup>

[§5 answers charge 5. The appeal to custom is mistaken since the majority is not always right.]

§6 answers charge 6 (schism) and also the question of where the true church was to be found in the Middle Ages. This was (and is) an important question for Protestants to answer, as is seen from this question posed by the Roman Catholic polemicist John Eck in 1529:

Christ is no bigamist: the Church of the apostles and ours are one Church. Before Luther was born, there was the Church that believed the Mass a sacrifice, seven sacraments, etc. She was the bride of Christ. Therefore now let us remain with that same Church, and not be joined to the Church of the wicked. Christ, because He loves the Church His bride, did not leave her, neither for five hundred nor a thousand years. How then would the Head desert His body for so long a time?<sup>4</sup>

This argument was especially powerful in the early years of the Reformation, when Protestantism was young and novelty was suspect.

[§7 answers charge 7. It is the Anabaptists, who at the time were occupying Münster, who are seditious. The apostles faced similar unjust accusations. §8 is Calvin's final appeal to Francis for a fair hearing and for justice. The closing date should be August 23, 1535 (n. 51).]

3. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten van Dorp*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1993), 86–95.

4. J. Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces*, 1.1, trans. F. L. Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 8.