

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 59*

### John Calvin – Part 2

#### The Institutes

Just for argument's sake, let us say that last week's handout was rather dry, somewhat monotonous, perhaps even boring. Would that be Calvin's fault? After all, this was a man who saved time by only eating one meal a day, spending most of his days writing or lecturing. Calvin's writings are not overloaded with personality. Instead, the writings speak of intellectual and theological ideas that cover the gamut from the nature of God to life after the grave. While the writings do relate some narrative accounts of events during Calvin's life, they could hardly be construed as telling any type of a story that might hold one's interests.

So, can we fairly blame Calvin for the "Get me a big dose of caffeine before I read this!" handout last week? Probably not! Calvin did live at an exciting time in history, and what he said directly influenced Western civilization in more ways than we can count. While Protestantism needed Luther to take wings, it needed Calvin to fly.

Calvin came at the time Western Civilization was growing literate again. The rising paper industry and the newly invented printing press brought learning and reading to the forefront for many common people. These things increased literacy and the amount of more readily available reading material (including the Bible itself) brought the common people ("laity") into conflict with certain church teaching and practice. Increasingly, the laity challenged the Church over issues of theology and biblical interpretation. Luther managed to establish a church fully independent from the Roman Catholic Church, and many communities and individuals were following suit and stepping out from under the control of Rome.

One such city was Geneva (modern Switzerland). The city fathers welcomed Calvin<sup>1</sup> and embraced his teachings. Calvin brought Geneva into the forefront of modern thought on religion and church doctrine. Some more traditional areas of Europe went through periods where any book printed in Geneva was banned. At a time when England would burn one at the stake for producing an English Bible, Geneva was printing the Bible in English for distribution.

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<sup>1</sup> To say the city fathers "Welcomed Calvin" may be over simplistic. Calvin was welcomed, then kicked out, and then welcomed again!

In Geneva, Calvin came into his own. He found a place that welcomed his efforts at organizing the Protestant faith. Calvin organized the Geneva church through structural as well as theological forms. Structurally, Calvin set up what is now considered a “Presbyterian” form of authority. Theologically, Calvin produced and constantly edited a multi-volume work called the *Institutes*<sup>2</sup> that set out Orthodoxy for those churches under his oversight. This writing also served as a training manual for those who sought to minister in these Protestant churches.

The *Institutes* are available today in several English translations. They are in four books:

- Book 1:* The Knowledge of God the Creator
- Book 2:* The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel
- Book 3:* The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow, and
- Book 4:* The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein

Last week’s handout traced Calvin’s thought through the first two books. Because that approach may have only cured the worst insomnia, we shall write off that lesson and re-approach Calvin’s four books in a different manner this week. We may lose some of the detail, but that is okay since we are after Church History Literacy rather than a graduate seminar on Calvin’s *Institutes*.

### **Book 1 - The Knowledge of God the Creator**

In his first book, Calvin answers the questions: Who is God? Who are we? How do we know this to be so?

Who is God? Calvin does not feel any need to try and prove God’s existence. For Calvin, God existence is inherently known by his creation. We see it in the universe and we sense it within ourselves. Calvin teaches that those who deny the existence of God are really not thinking too thoroughly or carefully. In 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin’s original Latin title is actually a lot more descriptive (kind of like what we would read on the back cover of a contemporary book). The full title was:

*The Institute of the Christian Religion, Containing almost the Whole Sum of Piety and Whatever It is Necessary to Know in the Doctrine of Salvation. A Work Very Well Worth Reading by All Persons Zealous for Piety, and Lately Published. A Preface to the Most Christian King of France, in Which this Book is Presented to Him as a Confession of Faith. Author, John Calvin, of Noyon. Basel, 1536.*

century speak, they are following the whims of their desires rather than what they know in their gut to be true.

Calvin believes that while we can see God in his creation, the vision we get is up to interpretation such that many reduce their beliefs into what are more properly termed superstitions. For an accurate view of God, we need to read of his revelation to us. God himself inspired that revelation and is worthy of our personal study and attention. We call God's revelation "scripture." In scripture, we see God as God chose to reveal himself.

Scripture is not, however, something we can read and understand entirely on our own. The reason why is we are flawed intellectually and spiritually. Not because God created us flawed, but because in the person of Adam, we have fallen from our original condition. Adam and Eve choose disobedience and the darkness of sin over the light of God. As a result, mankind "fell," darkening in both understanding and will power. For man to truthfully understand both himself and scripture, man needs God. When God opens our eyes to scripture, we begin to see and understand him in his purity. When we see God in his purity, we understand our own inadequacies.

### **Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel**

What happened to man in the fall (not Autumn, but "fall" from Paradise and purity!)? How does this involve our minds? How about our will power? Why did God give us an Old Testament? What does Jesus have to do with this? Why did God become a man in Jesus? These are questions Calvin answers in book two.

God made man perfectly and perfect. Man had will power, self-control, knowledge of right and wrong, and the supernatural gifts and abilities to take care of earth and its myriad of creatures. But rather than follow God and his direction, mankind chose to sin, becoming enslaved to sin and its consequences. Once sin's slave, mankind lost the ability to do good on his/her own. Mankind's understanding is also darkened. Right and wrong are not always so clear. The heart can justify actions the mind should know are wrong.

This moral blindness extends to our perception of God as well. We no longer see God as good, understand his wisdom, nor seek him as the answer to our problems. We might use science and the rules of nature that he put into place to help us (think medicine, mathematics, and engineering as examples here), but even using science, we fail to recognize it as a gift of God for combating the dangers and difficulties of a fallen world. In fact, sometimes mankind turns science into god and worships it, the creation, over against the Creator.

So, how does a fallen man with little to no will power and blindness to God receive sight? The only way – through God’s redemptive work. That work makes use even of Satan and his diabolical schemes.

God set out what we term the “Old Testament” to help us in a number of areas. It gives us insight and revelation into God. It gives us an understanding of the fall of man. It also gives laws and rules for society to help hold in check the abuses fallen man would naturally heap upon each other. But, the greatest reason God gave us the revelation we term the Old Testament was to reveal God and his character as it relates to human life and society.

For example, in the Ten Commandments, we see God’s concerns not only with our relationship to him (worshipping no other Gods and not making any images to confuse us as to who God really is), but also our relationships with each other (not stealing, bearing false witness, *etc.*). God has set out rules of conduct that both protect society and also point to Christ! Because no man, fallen as he is, will ever be able to live consistent with the commandments of God. The will power just is not there. Neither for that matter is the mindset! Man can rationalize away most any of God’s rules. So when Jesus comes, we see for the first time someone who not only follows the rules of God, but also understands them enough to explain them. We learn the spirit and not just the letter of the law.

When we see Jesus, we see more than a perfect life, we see a Redeemer. Because Jesus is both God and man, he effectively can mediate between the two. Being God, he can be fully obedient to God. Being man, he can pay the penalty of sin that is man owes. Jesus performs the fullness prophesied in the Old Testament as necessary for mankind’s reuniting with God after sin that separated humanity. Jesus does so as the ultimate prophet, proclaiming God and his word, as the king of kings, exercising ultimate dominion over all creation, and as the Highest of Priests, reconciling humanity to God and interceding on our behalf.

### **Book 3 – The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow**

How do we receive the mediation of Christ? What is real faith? What is the unpardonable sin? How should Christians live their lives? What role does prayer play? Did God pick out the people he would save? Is such an idea fair? What is the afterlife like? These are questions Calvin discusses in book three of his *Institutes*.

Calvin begins by emphasizing that God gave reconciliation to Christ so that Christ might give it to other. We are made right with God only through the death of Christ. Just as sin and its consequences came into the world through one man (Adam), restored life and fellowship with God came through one man (Jesus). We share the reconciliation of Christ with God through faith. Through faith, we are clothed with Christ and his righteousness as opposed to our own rags of sin. We are engrafted into God's holiness by sharing the holiness of Christ rather than existing on our own merit.

So, what is this "faith" and where does it come from? Calvin teaches, "many are dangerously deluded" about the meaning of faith. For most, he explains, "faith" is merely "a common assent to the gospel history." In other words, "I think Jesus probably did come and die for our sins." Yet, Calvin asserts that even Satan and the demons hold onto this kind of "faith" at this point in time. Certainly, this understanding of faith is not what imparts God's eternal life from Jesus into humanity."

For Calvin, "Faith" involves knowledge of God and his redemptive work in Christ, but it does not end there. Biblical faith that brings salvation is an "inward embracing" of God. It is a faith that arouses a love of God. It is a faith that brings a peace of God not only in the cosmic sense, but also in the human heart. That is not to say that one with faith never despairs or worries. But the Word of God becomes the shield of faith and it teaches us that the believer is assured of God's favor, for there is nothing powerful enough to separate the believer from God's love and salvation. This is a faith that leads to repentance. The believer understands his/her own inadequacies and laments them. Setting these inadequacies before God, those with faith confess sin regularly. Even the redeemed will continue to sin throughout their lives in these fallen bodies, doing things they wish they would not do and failing to do the things they know they should. But, God is faithful to forgive these sins. That is the assurance of scripture; that is the shield of faith.

So, how does a Christian live? Righteously! At least we should *try* to live righteously! Our motive for righteous living is love – love of righteousness but even more, love and gratefulness to Christ.

The Christian lives this way recognizing that we now belong to Christ. He sets our life's direction. He is the compass that leads us home. Because of him, we love our neighbor unconditionally; we live for others rather than ourselves. When we face adversity, we trust God. When things go well, we give the glory to God.

Never should the Christian revel in his own righteousness, for no man was ever able to produce good works on his own. The good works are God's gifts, the products of his hand in our lives.

The Christian's life should be one of prayer. The prayers of the faithful are to be reverent conversations with God himself.<sup>3</sup> We are to pray regardless of our moods, and we are to pray with humility. We approach God in Prayer with confidence because we do not pray out of our own righteousness. We pray in Jesus' name, and by that we mean that we approach God through the work and righteousness of Christ.

Calvin spends a good bit of time arguing for God's divine election of the redeemed. Here, Calvin means that God choose before the creation of the world those who would receive his mercy, while those not chosen would receive the damnation appropriate for their sin.

Calvin points to a number of scriptures that speak of predestination, including Romans 8:29-30 ("For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.") and Ephesians 1:5, 11 ("He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will .... In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.").

Since Calvin, a number of scholars have questioned his interpretation of both the scriptures he references as well as his arguments supporting his predestinarian views.

Mainline Catholic theology would agree that God predestines the redeemed, but takes issue with Calvin on whether God predestines the damned because the Catholic view is based on both scripture and tradition mentioning one, but not the other. Plus, Catholics view the extreme emphasis on predestination as deemphasizing the free will of the human being.

Thomas Aquinas (see lessons 46-47) had written previously on predestination. Aquinas considers it as part of God's omnipotence ("all powerful") and omnipresence ("all present"). As such, predestination is a term we use regarding human time. For God there is no time. God is simply omnipotent in the past,

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<sup>3</sup> For Calvin, to seek the prayers of saints is to rob Jesus of his sole honor as mediator with God. Calvin did not believe that the deceased were of a disposition to pray for the living in the way that the living might pray for each other.

present, and future all at once. For Aquinas, there really is no predestination as such for God. It is a human term to help us understand the extent of His simple Being.

Many Protestants (including parts of Protestantism directly “descended” from Calvin) consider Calvin’s teaching on predestination as a harsh understanding of God and redemption. Some have taken the opposite viewpoint challenging whether those scriptures are referencing “personal” predestination of certain individuals or corporate predestination of the *church* that God has chosen for eternity. Others point out that while the Bible teaches that we are secure in the knowledge that God has chosen and selected us, we also have clear biblical teaching that we have the free choice to make on choosing God.

An example of this teaching is found in the words of Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, *but you were not willing*” (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). These scholars are quick to show that scripture squarely places the responsible choice for accepting God’s forgiveness on the shoulders of people while at the same time providing the assurance that God has chosen his people and they should have neither fear of eternity nor arrogance of personal achievement.

I might insert a personal perspective here. Calvin’s inability to accept mystery in this area is his downfall. God predestines, and allows for free will. Both are true. To human logic, this might seem contradictory. So many theologians have grappled with this ever since, and tend more towards one or the other, God’s predestination of all things, or human free will. In God, it is simply a bigger mystery than we human can fully understand while still on this earth. Good theology is quick to admit divine mystery (think Trinity), and live with the tension. We should be careful when we bend, trim, and twist one element or the other to make a cleaner “fit.”<sup>4</sup>

Calvin explains eternity as a place and time when the believers are resurrected with transformed bodies that are perfect and no longer subject to decay. These bodies are physical and not unlike our current bodies, although without the limitations and frailties. Calvin uses as his texts on this point the passages of scripture that speak of Jesus after his resurrection. His apostles were able to see him, recognize him, touch him, and watch him eat.

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<sup>4</sup> Want an intriguing good time on this one? Read Romans 9 – 11 and start chewing!

## **Book 4 – The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein**

In the fourth and final book, Calvin takes on the issues of Church and Church structure. He sets out the value and importance of believers meeting together in the church, even though the true eternal church he understood to be an invisible entity that surpasses time and not a formal organization.

It is through the church, Calvin wrote, that the ministry of God is applied to his people. It is also through the church that people are educated in the important matters of faith. The church oversaw baptism, the Lord's Supper, and corporate worship, all areas where Calvin spends considerable time explaining and justifying the practices of the congregations under his oversight.

This book is also where Calvin sets out the church administration and structure. Calvin believed in ministers elected by the congregation, boards of deacons to govern the expenditures of the church's resources, and larger bodies of deacons or "archdeacons" who oversaw the work of the various congregations.

Calvin took strong issue with the Catholic papacy, finding no scriptural authority for its claim of preeminence over all of Christendom. To Calvin, the real "Catholic" church was the gathering of believers that stood on the teachings of scripture. Calvin did not believe the church should break into pieces, but he thought that his churches were the true extension of the universal church and the Roman Catholic Church was the "schism" group by adhering to human tradition instead of scripture.

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

So, what do we make of Calvin and his institutes? What do we have to take home?

1. Consider God, and recognize how inadequate our efforts are to live by his standards without failing. Paul wrote to the Romans and reminded them, "We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (Romans 3:9). Truly, "there is no one righteous, not even one; no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10).



2. At the same time, consider God and stand amazed at his greatness and the fact that he knows us down to the number of hairs on our heads, and loves us so much that he would pay a supreme sacrifice to hold us in eternity. It is His *love* that Jesus spoke of saying, “for God so *loved* the world [Yes, Jesus said “world,” not “selected individuals”!] that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). So, as Paul writes, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of Life set me free from the law of sin and death. And we have the assurance that nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).
3. So, we live a life of love and faithfulness, loving him who first loved us. As John wrote, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:9-11, 19).
4. We live confident that death is not the end. Again, Paul explained it,” Christ died for our sins...was buried... was raised on the third day... and appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living...If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead...For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive... But with what kind of a body? ...The dead shall be raised imperishable, and we will be changed...then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’” (1 Corinthians 15).