

# A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

## The Knowledge of God the Creator

### I. Introduction – or “Why would anyone want to get up at 7:00 am to study a book written in Latin 500 years ago?”

#### A. John Calvin, the Man (1509-1564)

1. Doctorate in law (1532) from the University of Orléan
2. Seeds of the Reformation
3. Transformation of Geneva

*“Geneva is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in this earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed, I have not seen in any other place.”* – John Knox (1513-72)

#### B. Calvin's Legacy

1. Education – The Academy
2. The Poor
3. Ethics and God's Moral Law
4. Freedom of the Church
5. Decentralized Politics
6. Doctrine of Vocation
7. Music in the Vernacular: The Psalter

*“He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty.”*  
– George Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellancies*, 450.

#### B. Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Original Title - *Basic instruction (institutio) in the Christian religion, embracing just about the whole sum of godliness, and all that needs to be known in the doctrine of salvation; a work very well worth reading by everyone zealous for godliness*

1. Purpose of the *Institutes*:
  - a. Instruction in Reading Scripture

*“Still today, one simply cannot read [The Institutes] receptively without being searched, humbled, and challenged regarding one's sincerity and progress (Calvin's favorite word), or lack of it, in one's personal Christian life.”*  
– J.I. Packer, Intro to *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, xi.

- b. Defense Against False Charges

*“When it was then published, it was not that copious and laboured work which it now is, but only a small treatise containing a summary of the principle truths of the Christian religion; and it was published with no other design that that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers.”*  
– Calvin, *Psalms Commentary*

2. Structure of the *Institutes*
  - a. Book I – Knowledge of God the Creator
  - b. Book II – Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel
  - c. Book III – The Way in Which we Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From it, and What Effects Follow
  - d. Book IV – The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein

### III. Part One (pp.1-35): Knowing God and Ourselves

*Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves... In the second place, those blessings which unceasingly distil to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain. Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty... We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves... (1.1.1)*

*On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. For (such is our innate pride) we always seem to ourselves just, and upright, and wise, and holy, until we are convinced, by clear evidence, of our injustice, vileness, folly, and impurity... So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness will become polluted with the greatest iniquity; what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom will disgust by its extreme folly. (1.1.2)*

1. What do the opening lines of the *Institutes* state will be the overarching theme (or close to it) of the book?
2. What does Calvin say is crucial for a true knowledge of ourselves? How do we come to a true knowledge of God? Which one comes first?
3. What did Calvin mean when he said, “*We know God as He is toward us, not as He is in Himself*”? What valuable lesson should we learn from this statement about our knowledge of God? Is it true knowledge?

*“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deut 29:29)*

4. According to Calvin, does piety (love, reverence, devotion to God, etc.) flow from knowledge of Him? Why or why not? How do we get this piety? Do you believe this? How well do you think we do this?
5. How would people have known God if Adam had not fallen into sin? What did the Fall do to our abilities and desires with respect to knowledge of God? Do we still know something about God this way (see Rom 1:18-20, Ps 19:1-2)?
6. Key question: If we don't know enough about God to be saved, what do we need (besides a new heart!)?