Introduction

As we embark on a 1-2 year study of Calvin’s Institutes, we are treating ourselves to the wisdom and piety of one of the great works of the Christian tradition. The older as well as the more recent observers of Calvin wax euphoric on his greatness. His contemporary, Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), referred to him as “The Theologian.” His mentor and co-laborer, Martin Bucer (1491–1551), described Calvin to the Geneva town council as “that elect and incomparable instrument of God, to whom no other in our age may be compared, if at all there can be the question of another alongside of him.”

Among the older commentators the nineteenth century German-American theologian, Philip Schaff (1819–1893), calls the first edition of the Institutes “the masterpiece of a precocious genius of commanding intellectual and spiritual depth and power.” It is, he continues, “one of the few truly classical productions in the history of theology,” earning Calvin the double title of “The Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas of the Reformed Church.” The greatest of the theologians of Old Princeton, B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), claims that “what Thucydides is among Greeks, or Gibbon among eighteenth century English historians, what Plato is among philosophers, or the Iliad among epics, or Shakespeare among dramatists, that Calvin’s Institutes is among theological treatises.” He cites the brilliant nineteenth century Scottish theologian William Cunningham, who considered the Institutes “the most important work in the history of theological science.” The French biographer of Calvin, Francois Wendel (1905–1972), calls the Institutes a monumental work,” even “truly a theological summa of Reformed Protestantism.”

Among more recent observers, John Murray (1898–1975), the great Scottish theologian of Westminster Theological Seminary’s founding generation, refers to the Institutes as “the opus magnum of Christian theology.” John T. McNeil, editor of the most recent edition, calls the Institutes a “masterpiece,” and claims it “holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected the course of history, molding the beliefs and behaviors of generations of mankind.” Even the neo-Orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth (1886–1968), Emil Brunner (1889–1966), and T. F. Torrance (1913–2007) hold Calvin in highest regard, seeing themselves as the distance successors of the first generation of Reformers. Alister E. McGrath, in his biography of Calvin,

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3 Schaff, History, VIII, 329.
5 Cited in Warfield, vi.
9 They have done so at the expense of the Reformers’ immediate successors, the so-called Protestant Scholastics, whom the neo-orthodox despised. The wedge that they drove between Calvin and his successors (e.g. Beza, Perkins, Olevianus, Turretin) has been shown by Richard A. Muller to be completely untenable, in his two works, The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition (University Press: Oxford, 2003). See also his four volumes entitled Post-Reformation Reformed
calls the *Institutes* “the most influential theological work of the Protestant Reformation, eclipsing in importance the rival works of Luther, Melanchthon, and Zwingli.” Finally, “It is taken for granted,” says Elsie Anne McKee, “that John Calvin was one of the great theologians of the Christian tradition, and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is . . . probably the single most influential book of the Protestant Reformation.”

**History**

The first edition was published in 1536, with a preface written in August 1535, when Calvin was barely 26 years old. It means that he wrote the bulk of it when he was 25. Given that he was not converted until sometime in 1532-33, it means that Calvin was a very quick learner. “How this beautifully crafted expression and interpretation of God’s loving power appeared from the hand of a twenty-five year old exile who had never studied theology cannot be adequately explained by historical circumstances,” admits his recent biographer, Bruce Gordon. The first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) sold out, giving us some indication of its popularity. The second edition (1539) was three times the size, having grown from 6 to 17 chapters. The third edition (1543) expanded to 20 chapters. The final versions (1559 Latin, 1560 French) were nearly 25% larger than the previous, reorganized into 4 books made up of 80 chapters. It had become “almost a new book,” as the sub-title claimed. In 1536 it was about the size of the Old Testament and the Synoptic Gospels, as McNeill points out. The *Institutes* was first translated into English by Thomas Norton in 1561, then by John Allen in 1813 (14 American edition 1816), by Henry Beveridge in 1845-6, and finally by Ford Lewis Battles in 1960. The completed *Institutes* were soon translated into Italian (1557), Dutch (1560), German (1572), Spanish (1597), Bohemian (1617), Hungarian (1624), and perhaps even Greek (1618). Its popularity has continued across the centuries to the present day. As McNeill says, “Perhaps no other theological work has so consistently retained for four centuries a place on the reading list of studious Christians.” Moreover it “continues to challenge intensive study, and contributes a reviving impulse to thinking in the areas of Christian doctrine and social duty.” Again, “It is a living, challenging book that makes personal claims upon the reader.”

**Purpose**

What was Calvin’s aim in writing his *Institutes*? Some background is in order. The title *institutio* was employed by church fathers such as Lactantius, Ambrose, and Isidore, by medieval theologian Bernard, and by contemporaries Erasmus (1466–1536) and Budé (1468–1540). Its basic meaning is “instruction” or “education.” Calvin intended his first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) as a relatively brief catechetical manual, or “instruction” for the church. It contained, he claimed then, “a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion” that all might know the faith of those who were called Protestants. As we’ve noted, many editions followed (e.g. 1539, 1543, 1545, 1550, 1559), expanding the original text to 4.5 times its original size, appearing both in Latin (for scholars) and French (for the people e.g. 1541, 1551, 1557, 1562).
However, between 1536 and 1539 Calvin’s understanding of his greater theological project, and the various
genres by which to pursue it, began to clarify. Simultaneously he was writing catechisms and commentaries,
revising the Institutes, and preaching sermons. Calvin’s first catechism was published in French in 1537 and in
Latin in 1538. He published his first commentary, that on Romans, in 1540, with a dedication written from
Strasbourg on October 18, 1539. Here he commends “lucid brevity” and is critical of “long and wordy
commentaries.”

He criticizes the commentaries of both Melanchthon and Bucer, the former for failing to
comment on the whole text (“he . . . passes over many matters which can cause great trouble to those of average
understanding”), and the latter for being “too verbose to be read quickly by those who have other matters to deal
with, and too profound to be easily understood.” Melanchthon “has not gone into every detail,” while Bucer
“has done so at greater length than can be read in a short time.” The solution: Calvin’s commentaries will
treat every point with such brevity that my readers would not lose much time in reading in the present work
what is contained in other writings.”

What are these “other writings” in which Calvin’s readers may pursue theological discussion at length? His
theological treatises and especially the Institutes. In Calvin’s scheme the various genres function as follows:

- **Catechisms** would fulfill the catechetical function of the Institutes, 1536, of providing a brief “summary
  of the principal truths of the Christian religion” for the people of God;
- **Commentaries** would provide brief, succinct exegetical comments on the texts of Scripture without
  much theological elaboration; they were to be models of *brevitas* and *facilitas* (ease of expression,
  clarity);
- **Sermons** would be expansions of the commentaries: more detailed explanation, cross-referencing,
  theological elaboration and practical application; Muller cites as an example of sermonic expansion
  Calvin’s work on Galatians, in which his sermons, preached between November 14, 1557 and May 15,
  1558 are nearly five times the length of the commentary, published in 1548. His comments on Galatians
  3:3-5 require only a few paragraphs, whereas he devotes an entire sermon to it in his preaching.
- **Institutes** would be the place where the various theological topics discovered in the course of the
  exegetical work would be explained at length, making their detailed development in the commentaries
  unnecessary.

This division of labor, or distinction in genres, meant that the second edition of the Institutes was an entirely
different kind of work. Warfield describes the transition from the 1st to 2nd editions as a transformation “from a
short handbook on religion for the people into a scientific treatise in dogmatic theology for the students of
theology.” It was intended, he says, “as a text-book in theology.”

If we turn to Calvin’s preface (found in Institutes, 3-5, for the 1539 Latin and 1541 French editions) we can
better understand Calvin’s meaning. He expresses there his intent:

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18 John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Ross Mackenzie (trans.), Calvin’s
Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1.
19 Ibid., 3.
20 Ibid.
21 Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 144.
23 Ibid., xxxiii.
It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine word . . . for I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture . . .

He then mentions his then future commentaries (having not yet published one as of 1539):

I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces (Latin communes).

We will want to return to Calvin’s mentioning “order” and “commonplaces” in the above citations.

For now we will move ahead to his preface to the French edition of 1560 (McNeill, 6-8, first published in the first French edition of 1541). Here he mentions a second purpose:

It can be a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture.

Latin versions were for scholars. Vernacular versions were for ordinary Christians. Consequently Calvin exhorts,

All those who have reverence for the Lord’s word, to read it, and to impress it diligently upon their memory, if they wish to have, first, a sum of Christian doctrine, and second, a way to benefit greatly from reading the Old as well as the New Testament.

Note that he repeats the relationship between his projected commentaries and the Institutes as now redesigned: “I shall use the greatest possible brevity,” he writes of the commentaries, “because there will be no need for long digressions, seeing that I have treated at length almost all the articles (Latin loci) pertaining to Christianity.”

A third reason can be found in Calvin’s long “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France” first written August 23, 1535, and retained in each successive edition of the Institutes. Schaff claims that Calvin’s preface “is reckoned among the three immortal prefaxes in literature.” Essentially it is an apology, a defense of Reformed Protestantism against charges of heresy and radicalism (i.e. Anabaptism). He intends not a “full-scale apology,” nor a “defense” per se, “but merely to dispose your mind to give a hearing to the actual presentation of our case.”

Calvin’s three purposes, then, are 1) train Christian ministers; 2) educate Christian laypeople; 3) defend Reformed Protestantism from its enemies. B. B. Warfield, the greatest of the Princeton theologians, summarizes the Institutes as “the first serious attempt to cast into systematic form that body of truth to which the Reformed...”
churches adhered as taught in Holy Scriptures.” Schaaff labels it “a systematic exposition of the Christian religion,” a “vindication” of the evangelical faith,” and an “apologetic” defending Protestants from their persecutors. Its range, according to McNeill, is “the whole field of Christian theology.” Its comprehensiveness surpasses all the other theological works of the sixteenth century. “It’s superiority is still greater with respect to the order and symmetry with which it is composed,” continues McNeill.

Design
Calvin was concerned with the “right order of teaching” (ordo recte dicendi) according to which the topics (loci) would be organized, as well as important disputed dogmatic themes (disputationes). The twin organizational concerns of the Institutes then are 1) the identity of the basic topics for discussion, and, 2) the proper order for presenting these topics. Melanchthon published a work of systematic theology in 1521 and again in 1535 entitled Commonplaces (Loci Communes or “Universal Topics”). In its 1539 form, says Muller, “the Institutes was restructured and augmented in order that it might serve as the repository of the loci communes (universal topics, or ‘commonplaces’) and disputationes that might otherwise have appeared in the commentaries.” Calvin continued to tinker with its order until the final edition. “I was never satisfied,” he said, “until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth.”

Structure
The Institutes is structured in four books roughly according to the Creed. Book I deals with God the Father, Book II God the Son, Book III God the Holy Spirit, and Book IV the Church. We say “roughly” structured by the creed because catechetical influences as well as the Apostle Paul’s structure in the book of Romans may also be discerned. For example, Muller points out that Book II follows the Pauline ordo in its reflections on sin. Even Book I can be seen as Pauline, following the arrangement of Romans which begins with God and the human predicament (1:18–3:21). Chapters in Book II, on the Decalogue, the sacraments and prayer take the Institutes beyond the Creed. Still, Yale Divinity School professor Bruce Gordon, in his biography of Calvin, labels the Institutes “a masterpiece of organization and clarity.”

Sources
As for the various sources from which Calvin draws, the most important is Scripture. McNeill finds Calvin’s use of Scripture to support each point of his argument “astounding,” even “perhaps never been surpassed.” He holds to “literal,” that is, historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture eschewing allegorical interpretations. He also reads Scripture redemptively. “The Scriptures,” says Calvin, “are to be read with the purpose of finding Christ there.”

After Scripture we find heavy use of the church fathers, especially John Chrysostom and Augustine. By merely counting two editors’ notations, one finds 750 citations of Augustine in the 1521 pages of the McNeill edition, 163 of Gregory or Cyprian, 130 of Tertullian, Jerome, or Chrysostom, 123 of Leo I, Ambrose, or Lactantius,

32 Schaaff, viii, 330.
34 Muller, Unaccommodated Calvin, 119. See also Institutes, 5.
35 “John Calvin to the Reader,” 1559, in Institutes, 3.
36 Muller, Unaccommodated Calvin, 138-39.
37 Gordon, Calvin, 302.
Irenaeus or Athanasius, and 200 other citations from the church fathers. In all, the editors have found 1406 patristic citations or allusions in the Institutes.

Calvin knows and is guided by the ancient councils of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. While he often attacks the medieval scholastic theologians, he “readily employs the terminology in use in the (philosophical) schools,” as Wendel points out. Among the Medieval theologians the editors of the Institutes find Bonaventure cited or alluded to 16 times, Bernard 40 times, and 143 references to Aquinas!

Turning to the Reformers, Calvin’s debt to Luther is great. The first edition of the Institutes follows the order of Luther’s Little Catechism. Calvin’s doctrine of justification by faith is Luther’s, as well as the surrounding doctrines of original sin, Christ’s atonement, and the application of redemption by the Holy Spirit through the word and sacraments. Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s colleague on the reform at Wittenburg, was in regular correspondence with Calvin. Melanchthon was the primary author of the Augsburg Confession, the standard Lutheran confession of faith, about which Calvin said, “There is nothing in (it) which is not in accord with our teaching.” In addition, it was Melanchthon’s work on dogmatics, Loci Communis (1521, 1535), noted above, that had a decisive influence on the direction the Institutes would take as Calvin transitioned from its design as a catechism to a summary of doctrine. Finally, Martin Bucer (1491–1551) had an important influence on Calvin, especially during Calvin’s Strasbourg years (1539-41). Wendel shows Bucer’s influence on Calvin’s understanding of predestination, the unity of the covenants, repentance, the doctrines of the church, church discipline, and we might add, worship.

Calvini Opera
Muller insists out that like most of the theologians of his era, Calvin “understood himself as a preacher and exegete, and understood the primary work of his life as the exposition of Scripture.” He points out that the Institutes are equaled in length by Calvin’s sermons on Job, as well as by each of his commentaries on Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Pentateuch. He argues decisively that Calvin must be interpreted in light of the whole body of his work. Given what we’ve noted above about the complementary relationship between the catechisms, sermons, and especially the commentaries and Institutes, we will err if we read the Institutes in isolation from Calvin’s other work. According to Calvin scholar Elsie McKee, the Institutes are “to be read in tandem with the commentaries,” and the biblical citations as “cross references to the exegetical writings.” Muller continues: “The Institutes must not be read instead of commentaries, but with them . . . Indeed if one wishes to ascertain the biblical basis of Calvin’s topical discussions and disputationes one must read the commentaries.” Similarly, the opposite is true. One must read the Institutes to find theological elaboration, biblical cross-referencing, historical examples, or rebuttals of variant theological views lacking in the commentaries. Muller insists that the Institutes not be viewed as the “centerpiece of Calvin’s theological enterprise” but rather, “as he continued to describe it, the set of loci communes and disputationes that stood in a complementary relationship with his central effort of commenting on the text of Scripture.” Half of the biblical citations found in the McNeill text of the Institutes are the work of the editors, not of Calvin. However, Calvin’s own citations serve the purpose of what Muller calls “intertextuality,” of directing readers to the commentaries

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40 Wendel, Calvin, 126.
41 Wendel, Calvin, 136.
42 Ibid., 138-144.
43 Muller, Unaccommodated Calvin, 5.
44 Elsie Anne McKee, “Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin’s Institutio,” 154. See also Muller, Unaccommodated Calvin, 107.
46 Ibid., 133.
for exegetical detail. His citations frequently refer “to the initial verse of an identifiable pericope on which Calvin has commented at length.”47 When they are not cross-references to Calvin’s commentaries “they probably should be viewed as references to the exegetical tradition and not as ‘proof-texts’” in any pejorative sense.48 Many issues never addressed in the Institutes that typically are addressed in theological works are addressed in the commentaries and sermons. They may be omitted in the Institutes because they weren’t controversial or hadn’t become the subject for a universal topic. For example, he says little about the divine essence and attributes in the Institutes, while he elaborates these things as they are examined exegetically in the commentaries. Muller cites the example of Exodus 3:14, where Calvin demonstrates his continuity with the assumptions of the medieval scholastic tradition.49 Similarly Calvin’s doctrines of creation, of the covenant, and of the third use of the law are found mainly in the sermons and commentaries.

In summary:

The Institutes cannot be rightly understood apart from Calvin’s exegetical and expository efforts, nor can his exegetical and expository efforts be divorced from his work of compiling the Institutes.50

Calvin’s Institutes

Resource Bibliography


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47 Ibid., 149.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 153.
50 Ibid., 186.


“Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion”


### Two-Year Schedule for Reading *Calvin’s Institutes*

#### Year 1 – Vol. I (based on about 2-3 pp/day)

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#### Year 2 – Vol. II (based on about 2-3 pp/day)

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Questions for Discussion
(pp 1-69)

Prefaces
1. What is Calvin’s purpose in writing the Institutes? (p 4, 6, 7, 8, 31)

2. In what relation does the Institutes stand to his commentaries? (p 3, 5, 7)

Book I – The Knowledge of God the Creator (Chapters i-v)
1. How are the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self interrelated? (p 35ff)

2. What does Calvin mean by the knowledge of God? (p 40, 70)

3. What role does pietas play in Calvin’s theology? (pp 39-43)

4. Where does the knowledge of God begin for Calvin? (p 43ff)

5. What argument does Calvin employ to demonstrate God’s existence? (pp 51-63)

6. Is God’s self-revelation in nature clear or unclear? (pp 51-63) If clear, why do we not profit by it? (pp 63-69)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 69-120)

Book I – The Knowledge of God the Creator (Chapters vi–xii)

1. Why did God add Scriptural revelation to natural revelation? (pp 69ff)

2. How does Calvin answer the question raised by the Roman Catholics, that if the church determines what is and isn’t Scripture, that its authority is greater than Scripture’s? (pp 74ff)

3. Upon what does Calvin base confidence that Scripture is the word of God if not the testimony of the church? (pp 76–80)

4. Of what use are the various evidences for the truthfulness of Scripture as God’s word? (p 83ff)

5. In addition to Scripture’s self-authenticating properties, what other arguments does Calvin use to demonstrate that Scripture is the word of God? (pp 81-92)

6. Yet, in the end, upon what would Calvin have us base our confidence that Scripture is the word of God? (p 92)
7. What is Calvin’s argument against those who in the name of the Spirit show contempt for the word? (pp 93-96)

8. Why does Calvin take up the subject of images in his discussion of God’s revelation, that is, our knowledge of God? (p 99ff)

9. What is Calvin’s answer to Gregory’s dictum that images are the books of the uneducated? (p 105ff)

10. Is Calvin against all representational art? (p 112ff)

11. What images are allowed in the churches? (p 113ff)

12. What does Calvin make of the distinction between latria and dulia? (pp 111, 118ff)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 120-183)

Book I – The Knowledge of God the Creator (Chapters xiii.1–xiv.22)

1. What does Calvin say in order to restrain carnal speculations about the nature of God? (120ff)

2. Certain heretics were demanding that the church limit itself to the language of the Bible and not go beyond its terminology (e.g. “persons,” “essence,” “substance,” “Trinity”). What is Calvin’s answer? (pp 122ff)

3. On page 147 Calvin summarizes the scriptural and historical doctrine of the Trinity, which he expounds in pages 120-159. What is that doctrine?

4. What does Calvin first say to heretics in order to limit unwarranted speculations? (146-7)

5. How does he clinch his argument for the church’s doctrine of the Trinity in pages 155-159?
6. What is among Calvin’s chief concerns in his discussion of creation generally and the creation of angels specifically (159-172)?

7. What does Calvin say is the function of angels? What about “guardian angels”? What about hierarchies of angels (166-169)?

8. Why does God use angels at all, rather than helping us directly (171)?

9. At what does the devil aim and what is his nature (175,176)?

10. How can it be that the devil and his demons are creations of God (175)?

11. Why does God suffer the devil to exit (175,176)?

12. How should we respond to God’s work of creation (180-182)?
Questions for Discussion

(Book I – The Knowledge of God the Creator (Chapters xv.1– xviii.4))

1. To what theme does Calvin return which was introduced at the beginning of the Institutes? Why? (183)

2. What must we know about ourselves before we can come to a “clear and complete” knowledge of God? (183)

3. What are the constituent parts of man? How does Calvin define the invisible part of man? (184-85)

4. Where does the image of God properly reside in man? (186-188)
5. Of what does God’s image in man consist? What remains of it? (189)

6. What is the relationship between the soul and the body? (192)

7. What does Calvin identify as the two fundamental faculties of the soul? (194-95)

8. Does Adam fall because of some defect in his nature? (195-96)

9. What false views of the relationship between Creator and Creation does Calvin refute in pages 197-207?

10. Yet Calvin admits that to us, events occur fortuitously, what does he mean? (208-210)
11. What is the crucial distinction that Calvin makes between God’s providence and our understanding of God’s purposes? (210-214)

12. What view of providence does Calvin rebut in pages 214-217? How does he do so?

13. Why do we receive from the contemplation of God’s providence “the best and sweetest fruit?” (218-225)

14. Against what is Calvin guarding by his references to “secondary causes” or “inferior causes” in pages 221-22?

15. What are we to understand when Scripture speaks of God’s “repentance”? (225-228)
16. Does God’s providential control extend over even the evil acts of evil beings and persons? (228-237)

17. Are there two wills of God, each at odds with the other, that which He has ordained and that which He has commanded, His decretive and His perceptive? (233-237)
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Questions for Discussion
(pp 241-316)

Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer (Chapters i.1–iv.8)

1. Once again, to what theme does Calvin return at the outset of Book Two? What would he have us know and against what does he warn us? (241-244)

2. What does Augustine, with Calvin agreeing, say was the original sin of Adam? (245-246)

3. What is the difference between Pelagius (ca 354–420) and Calvin/Augustine on original sin? (246-250)

4. How does Calvin define original sin? (250-255)

5. What two errors does Calvin wish to avoid as he discusses free will? (255-264)
6. Does Calvin like the term “free will”? Why or why not? (264-267)

7. What crucial aspect of self-knowledge is Calvin seeking to protect by his rejection of “free will”?

8. Fallen humanity still retains some qualities that distinguish it from the beasts. How so? (270-277, and notes 63 & 64).

9. What does Calvin think of the knowledge of God displayed by the pagan philosophers? What do they lack? (277-289)

10. How extensive are the effects of sin upon humanity? (289-292)
11. How does Calvin explain the virtuous pagan? (292-294) That is, if human nature is as bad as he says the Bible teaches it is, how is it that history provides examples of admirable pagans?

12. Explain the distinction Calvin makes between man sinning of necessity but without compulsion. (294-296)

13. What does Calvin say to those who argue that man’s will is weak and merely needs a little help, or that the will cooperates with grace in man’s salvation? (296-309)

14. How does Calvin explain that Scripture will attribute one event (e.g. Job’s afflictions) to God, Satan, and men? (309-11)

15. What does Calvin say about God hardening a sinners heart? (311-313)

16. What is Calvin’s concluding emphasis? (314-316)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 316-401)

Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer (Chapters v.1–viii.34)

1. How does Calvin respond to the various arguments for free will? (316-322)

2. How does Calvin answer those who say that God only commands us or exhorts us to do that which we have the (free will) capacity to do? (323-340)

3. How does Calvin finally summarize the biblical and Augustinian view? (340)

Chapter VI.

4. Calvin now turns his attention directly to the knowledge of God the Redeemer, the subject matter of Book II. What does he think of the knowledge and service of God apart from Christ? (340-342)
5. If salvation is to be found only in the mediation of Christ, how are Old Testament believers to be saved? (342-348)

Chapter VII. The Purpose of the “Law”

6. According to Calvin, what is the purpose of the Old Testament religion? (348-351)

7. More specifically, what is the purpose of moral law? (351-362)

8. In what sense has the law been abrogated for believers? (362-366)
Chapter VIII – Explanation of the Moral Law

9. Calvin turns his explanation of the purpose of the law to his exposition of the law, that is, of the Ten Commandments. What is the relationship between the natural law and the law as written in Scripture? (367-368)

10. For Calvin, the law of God is both sufficient and comprehensive. How so? (369-376)

11. How are we to understand the two tables of the law? (376-379)

12. How does Calvin divide the two tables and how does he understand their themes? (376-379)

13. How does Calvin see the preface to the Ten Commandment’s connecting their function in the life of Israel to their function in the life of the Christian church? (379-381)
14. What are the duties of worship outlined in the first four commandments? (381-401)
Questions for Discussion  
(pp 401-464)

Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer

Explanation of the Moral Law, (cont’d. (Chapters viii.35–xi.14)

1. How wide is the scope of the fifth commandment? (401-404)

2. How wide is the scope of the sixth and seventh commandments? (404-408)

3. How broad is the application of the eighth and ninth commandments? (408-413)

4. What is required by the 10th Commandment? (413-415) What for Calvin is the sum of the Law? (415-423)
Chapter IX: Christ Known Under the Law, Yet Clearly Revealed only in the Gospel

5. How should we compare the knowledge of Christ experienced by the Old Testament believer with that experienced by the New Testament believer? (423-428)

Chapter X: The Similarity of the Old and New Testaments

6. How are the Old and New Testaments similar? (428-434)

7. What is Calvin able to demonstrate by use of Bible biography? (434-449)

Chapter XI: The Difference Between the Two Testaments

8. How do the Testaments differ? (449-464)

9. Why did God not reveal the whole truth to all peoples from the beginning? Why did He for so long limit His self-revelation to Israel through types and shadows? (463-464)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 464-534)

Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer (Chapters xii.1– xvii.6)

Chapter II: Why Christ Had to Become Man

1. Why was it necessary that our Mediator be both God and man? (464-474)

Chapter XIII: Christ Assured the True Substance of Human Flesh

2. Having already established the true divinity of Christ in I.xiii.7-13 (129-138), what is Calvin establishing in II.xiii.1-4? (474-481)

3. Calvin’s fresh contribution to Christology can be seen at the end of page 481. Known as the extra Calvinisticum, what is it?

Chapter XIV: How the Two Natures of the Mediator Make One Person

4. What careful distinctions does Calvin make in his discussion of the dual nature of Christ? (482–493)
Chapter XV: What Christ Was Sent by the Father to do as Seen Through the Three-fold Office

5. What are the three “offices” or functions that Christ fulfills as our Redeemer? (494-503)

Chapter XVI: How Christ Has Fulfilled the Function of Redeemer

6. What motivates Calvin to elaborate upon the theme of humanity’s peril: the depth of men’s depravity and men’s impending doom? (503-507)

7. According to Calvin, what has Christ accomplished? (507-512)

8. How does Calvin interpret the clause of the Creed, “He descended into hell”? (512-520)

9. What importance does Calvin place upon Christ’s exhalation: His resurrection, ascension, session, and future judgment? (520-527)
Chapter XVII: Christ Has Merited God’s Grace and Salvation for Us

10. How does Calvin answer the alleged inconsistency between the notions of God’s free grace and Christ’s merit? (528-534)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 537-621)

(Chapters i.1–iii.25)

Chapter I – The Secret Working of the Spirit
1. Calvin is concerned now with the question of how the benefits of what Christ did outside of us (on the cross) come to benefit us. What is his answer? (537-542)

Chapter II – Faith Defined & Explained
2. What distinction does Calvin make between the Roman Catholic notion of “implicit” faith and true faith? (542-551)

3. What criticism does Calvin offer of the medieval distinction between “formed” and “unformed” faith? (551-559)

4. How does Calvin define faith? (559-562)
5. Does Calvin’s definition of faith exclude the possibility of doubt? (562-567)

6. Is true faith compatible with the fear of God? (568-573)

7. In what does the believer place his/her faith? (574-580)

8. Calvin returns to the work of the Holy Spirit (see III.i). Is the word alone enough to engender faith? (580-584) Is it enough to engender assurance? (585-595)

Chapter III – Repentance

9. According to Calvin, what is the relation between faith and repentance? (592-602).

10. According to Calvin, can believers expect to be free from all the influences of sin in this life? That is, how far may we expect sanctification to progress? (602-609)
11. According to Calvin, what are the fruits of true repentance? (609-615)

12. Are there sins from which there can be no repentance and no pardon? (615-621)
Questions for Discussion
(pp 622-701)


Chapter IV – Defective Views of Repentance

1. What is Calvin’s fundamental problem with the medieval/scholastic definition of repentance/penance? (622-626). Auricular confession (private confession to a priest, “in the ear”)? (626-638)

2. What is Calvin’s critique of the Roman Catholic practice of confession to a priest? (638-647)

3. What is the right view of absolution? (647-651)

4. What central biblical doctrine undermines the Roman Catholic notion that satisfaction is rendered to God through the merit of works? (651-654)
5. What does Calvin make of the Roman Catholic distinctions between “mortal” and “venial” sins, between the guilt of sin and the penalty of sin? (654–669)

Chapter V – Indulgences & Purgatory

6. What is the heart of Calvin’s objection to indulgences? (670-675)

7. How does Calvin go about refuting the doctrine of purgatory? (675-684)

Chapter VI – The Life of the Christian Man


9. What is the sum, the heart, the essence of the Christian life? (689-698)

10. How does the principle of self-denial affect our outlook on prosperity and adversity? (698-701)

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Questions for Discussion
(pp 702-768)

Book 3 – “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ:” “Benefits” & “Effects” (Chapters viii-xiii)

Chapter VIII – Bearing the Cross & Self-Denial

1. Calvin continues his discussion of self-denial into chapter VIII. Why is cross-bearing necessary? (702-708)

2. Christian suffering, however, is not stoicism. How does it differ from what he calls that “iron philosophy”? (708-712)

Chapter IX – Meditation on the Future Life

3. How does the hope of heaven affect our outlook on present suffering? (712-719)

Chapter X – Using the Present Life & Its Helps

4. Since believers are pilgrims on the way to heaven, of what use ought they to make of the things of this world? (719-725)
Chapter XI: Justification by Faith: Definitions

5. For Calvin, how important is the doctrine of justification? (725,726)

6. What are the two parts of justification by which Calvin defines it? (727-728)

7. What is the basic error of Osiander which Calvin is determined to refute? (729-743)

8. What does Calvin say in refuting the medieval schoolmen (the “scholastics” such as Lombard) and their sixteenth century defenders? (743-754)

Chapter XII: Judgment & Free Justification

9. What is it about God’s judgment that eliminates works from any consideration in justification? What, then, is the outlook of those who are ready to receive Christ? (754-763)

Chapter XIII: Two Notes Regarding Free Justification

10. What two additional notes does Calvin wish to make in Chapter XIII?
Questions for Discussion
(pp 768-849)

Book 3 – “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ:” “Benefits” & “Effects” (Chapters xiv.1-xix.16)

Chapter XIV. – The Beginning & Progress of Justification

1. In order to demonstrate that no one may be justified by works, Calvin divides humanity into four classes of persons. What does he have to say about the first class, pagans, even “good” pagans? (768-774)

2. What does Calvin have to say about the second and third classes of persons, the nominal believers and the hypocrites, in relation to justification by works? (774-776)

3. What does Calvin have to say about the fourth class of persons, those regenerated by God’s Spirit, in relation to justification by works? (776-779)
4. How does Calvin respond to the Medieval and Roman Catholic idea that any defects in our good works are compensated by works of supererogation (those beyond what is required from the Latin *erogare*, to spend)? (779-788)

Chapter XV. – Boasting About the Merits of Works Diminishes God’s Praise and Undermines Assurance

5. How does Calvin refute the notion that good works are meritorious? (788-797)

Chapter XVI. – Refutation of False Accusations of the Papists Regarding Justification by Faith Alone

6. How does Calvin answer the charge that the doctrine of justification, because it is severed from good works, encourages impiety? (797-802)

Chapter XVII. – Agreement of the Promises of the Law and of the Gospel

7. What does Calvin make of the argument that the law promises blessing in connection with obedience and good works? (802-808)
8. How are we to regard passages that seem to connect righteousness with keeping the law and good works? (808-814)

9. How does Calvin handle the passages from James 2 which seem to refute justification by faith alone? (814-818) Similarly, what about passages in the Psalms where personal righteousness or innocence is claimed? (818-821)

Chapter XVIII. – Works Righteousness Wrongly Inferred from Reward

10. What about the Roman Catholic claim that the promise of reward implies that works are the cause of salvation? (821-833)

Chapter XIX. – Christian Freedom

11. How important to Calvin is a right understanding of Christian freedom? Of what does it consist? Of what does its abuse consist? (833-849)