




Knowing God, Knowing Ourselves

A Practical Survey of Calvin's
Institutes

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Knowing God, Knowing Ourselves: A Practical Survey of Calvin's *Institutes*

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SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION

Your Thoughts?
Things You Hope
to Learn?
Questions?



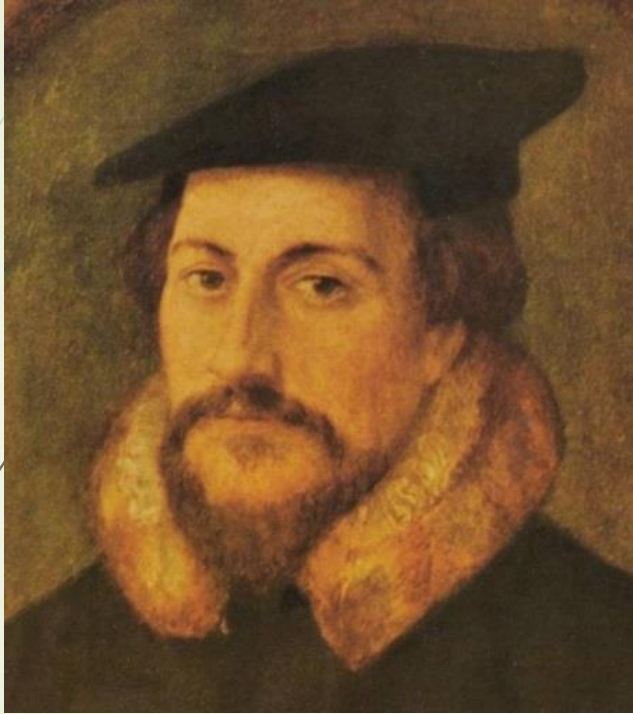
- Consider your thoughts and attitudes as we approach this study
- I invite you to give Calvin a fair hearing
- Understand before you criticize
- Be open to what the Spirit will teach us




Plan for Lesson 1

- Approach to the Class
- Context of Calvin
- Story of the Institutes
- Outline of Institutes
- Knowledge of God and Man

Approach to the Class



- ▶ Will NOT expect you to read along
 - ▶ But that would make it much more beneficial
 - ▶ Inexpensive online copies available
 - ▶ Or free:
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>
 - ▶ You might consider investing in a hard copy
 - ▶ The 1941 Edition translated by Robert White (Banner of Truth) is suggested
- ▶ I will try to make each week freestanding, so people can miss and still benefit
- ▶ I will draw out practical applications (not hard with Calvin, BTW)
- ▶ Will end with discussion and prayer



Nature of the *Institutes*, per David Calhoun

- ▶ **1. Biblical**
 - ▶ Almost 7000 biblical references in the final edition!
- ▶ **2. Systematic**
 - ▶ “Calvin’s true legacy is ... not a system but a method, the method of striving to see everything ... not from man’s point of view but from the viewpoint of God” (Fuhrmann)
- ▶ **3. Polemical**
 - ▶ Argues against opponents’ positions
- ▶ **4. Pastoral**
 - ▶ Calvin said teaching and exhortation should never be separated
- ▶ **5 Devotional**
 - ▶ “Piety is always built on knowledge of the true God and knowledge requires instruction.” (Calvin on Dan. 3:28)



Context of Calvin

- Roman Catholic Church was a mess
 - People dependent on Church as could not read Bible for themselves
 - E.g. Church translated “repent” as “do penance”
 - Church and state all too intertwined
 - Indulgences, relics, etc., mostly used to raise money
- Luther (1517) accidentally “started” the Reformation, though not trying to break from the Church
 - But the Church kicked Luther out
- Opened door to other reactions
- First edition of the *Institutes* only 19 years after!

Three Branches of the Reformation

Roman Catholics

Lutherans

Reformed

Anabaptists
("Rebaptizers")



The Reformed

- ▶ So named as felt Lutherans didn't go far enough in their change
- ▶ Zwingli first of the line really
 - ▶ Reacted so strongly against transubstantiation that he saw Lord's Supper as merely memorial
 - ▶ Luther couldn't go with that (at Protest of Speier, 1529), splitting the parties
- ▶ Calvin second generation in this group
 - ▶ A little later than Luther, though Luther later conceded he could have worked with Calvin's more moderate view of spiritual presence in the Lord's Supper



Story of the *Institutes*

- ▶ Calvin's story (born 1509; so was about 8 at time of 95 Theses)
 - ▶ Converted to the Reformed doctrines in his homeland – France (“conversion” in 1528)
 - ▶ When about to be found out, fled to Switzerland
 - ▶ Initially at Basle in 1535
 - ▶ Wanted to study and write, but responded to a forceful “call” to pastor in Geneva by William Farel
 - ▶ Chance for a Protestant city
 - ▶ Rocky time there; “fired” then recalled

Story of the *Institutes*

- ▶ Ongoing summary of Calvin's theology
 - ▶ Organizing all of Scriptural teaching
 - ▶ So, really flows from his commentaries to bring together their doctrine
 - ▶ Not to minimize direct Bible study
 - ▶ Calvin preached regularly verse-by-verse
 - ▶ His sermons and commentaries are still around today
 - ▶ Yet, *Institutes* best one-stop source for Reformation theology
 - ▶ Seen as a summary of his Commentaries and resource for those listening to sermons
- ▶ First edition in 1536, before to Geneva
 - ▶ This was extended confession/catechism really
 - ▶ The Ten Commandments
 - ▶ Apostles' Creed
 - ▶ Lord's Prayer
 - ▶ Sacraments (and false sacraments)
 - ▶ Christian Freedom: Church and state
 - ▶ Name refers to a treatise on principles, particularly in law
 - ▶ So "Principles of the Christian Religion" if you would



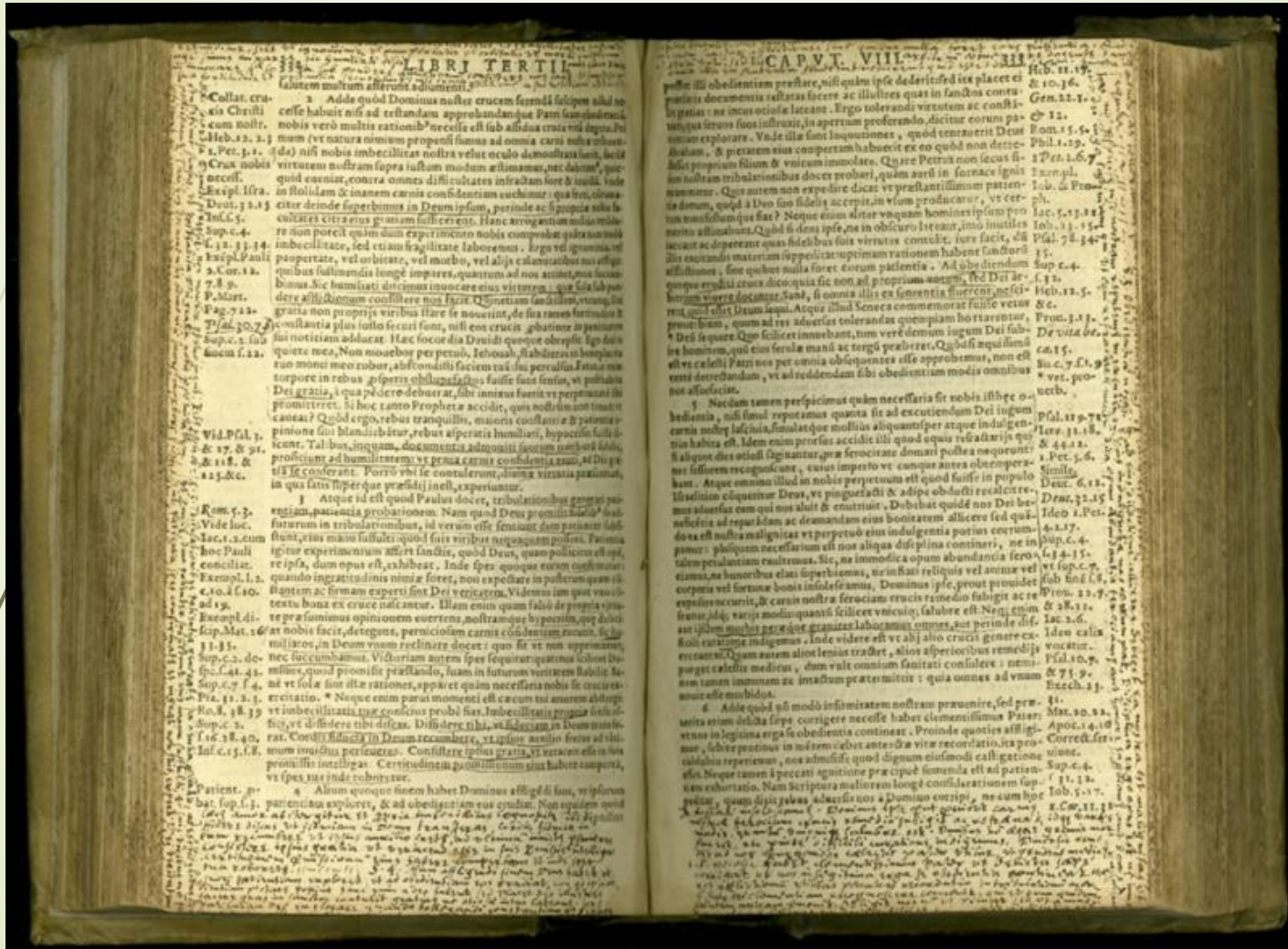
Story of the *Institutes*

- Kept expanding and updating
- Editions in 1539, 1541 (French), 1553, and 1559
- Grew to the four “books” of the final edition
- Editions in scholarly Latin, but also French for the people (recall lay people had no access to Scriptures in their own languages up to this point)
- Addressed to King Francis I of France
 - Arguing that he was reclaiming the historic position of the Church, not introducing new doctrines (thus leaned on Augustine, e.g.)

Outline of the Final *Institutes*

- ▶ No longer a catechism
- ▶ But built around a four-point summary of the Apostles' Creed
- ▶ BOOK I
 - ▶ Knowledge of God the Creator and Sovereign Governor of the World
- ▶ BOOK II
 - ▶ Knowledge of God the Redeemer
 - ▶ As shown in Jesus Christ
- ▶ BOOK III
 - ▶ Means of Receiving the Grace of Christ
 - ▶ Spirit, faith, salvation, Christian life, Christian freedom, prayer, predestination, resurrection
- ▶ BOOK IV
 - ▶ External Means to Salvation
 - ▶ Church, traditions, vows, sacraments, civil government
- ▶ Even more simply:
 - ▶ Book 1: Doctrine of God
 - ▶ Books 2-4: Plan of Salvation

Let's Begin!!



First English Printing of the Latin Institutes, with notes from A 16th Century reader

Where to Begin?




Share
YOUR IDEAS

Where to start??

- ▶ Those who don't understand Calvin might assume he'd start with predestination
- ▶ Others might think creation
- ▶ His choice may surprise us!



Book 1, Chapter 1: Knowledge of God and Ourselves



- If Calvin is to present what we know of God, then the first question is **epistemology**:
 - How do we know what we know?
- Calvin starts with a “chicken or egg” problem:
 - Nearly all our knowledge consists in what we know of God and what we know of ourselves
 - And we can't tell which to start with
- Yet whichever, it is KNOWLEDGE we begin with
 - Not the “being” or “existence” of God
 - This deliberately stresses the primacy of **REVELATION** (Creation; Bible)

What is Knowledge?

- ▶ For Calvin, though he alternates two Latin words,
- ▶ Knowledge is NEVER “mere” or “simple” or purely objective knowledge of God
- ▶ Rather, it is closer to “existential apprehension”
 - ▶ We know God in our lives.
 - ▶ While we have revelation, the Spirit is the One who seals knowledge to us
 - ▶ Think of the OT idea of “knowing” as sexual (vs today when it is more impersonal in terms)
 - ▶ **It is intimate, not formal**
 - ▶ Sadly, much Reformed theology has lost this focus
 - ▶ Theology is practical, not dry, when done properly

Compare Our Culture

- ▶ American Christianity is SO practical
 - ▶ It doesn't even seek knowledge of God
 - ▶ How God can help us
 - ▶ Focuses on our feelings and assumes God is there to serve them
 - ▶ Making us ill-equipped for the trials of the real world
 - ▶ And thus IMpractical!
- ▶ Prides itself in “just give me Jesus” and ignoring doctrine
 - ▶ But who IS Jesus?
- ▶ Knowing versus using
 - ▶ Compare in a marriage
 - ▶ Knowing our spouse is not using them for our pleasure/benefit



Knowing God; Knowing Ourselves

- ▶ Since we “live and move” in God (Acts 17:28)
 - ▶ We can't look at ourselves without turning to contemplate God
 - ▶ We are **subsistent** on Him
 - ▶ Literally can't live without Him
- ▶ Knowing ourselves and the benefits of God leads us to God as the Spring from which these blessings flow
- ▶ Our spiritual poverty helps us know God's greatness
- ▶ Conversely, then, we readily may ignore God when we feel self-sufficient
- ▶ The sin of Adam and Eve, and ourselves, points us to our need of God
- ▶ **Our fear because of sin leads to humility which leads to God**
- ▶ **Without humility, self-knowledge leads to pride**
 - ▶ The root of all error



Helpful quotes

- *“We are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God”*
- *“We cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves”*
- Contrast with the views of self-esteem rampant in the culture today
- And beware Reformed Christians today who love to argue doctrine for the sake of argument alone...out of pride

Know God to Know Ourselves

- ▶ If we see ourselves in our weakness and that points us to God
- ▶ How much more will seeing God help us to know ourselves and our weakness better
- ▶ **Only in looking on the face of God do we truly know ourselves**
- ▶ Contrast philosophy where self-knowledge serves pride and leads to error
- ▶ A person “descends from contemplating him [God] to scrutinize himself”
- ▶ In looking at God, we see who we are as humans: fallen and sinful
 - ▶ And as individuals with our particular shortcomings
- ▶ We judge ourselves by God, and no other standard



Knowing God and Ourselves

- ▶ Calvin doesn't allow us to feel complacent because we feel good about ourselves compared to other people
 - ▶ Especially in a day like ours where there are few truly Godly Christians. It takes little to be better than most who profess Christ in the West.
 - ▶ Like looking at the ground (Calvin loves metaphors!): we think we see well...
 - ▶ Until we look at the sun and realize how dimly we see



Man Before God's Majesty

- ▶ Saints' knowledge of God begins with "dread and wonder" as described in Scripture
 - ▶ E.g. Isaiah's encounter with God
 - ▶ Contrasts with the casual "knowledge" we see today
- ▶ **We think too much of ourselves today because we have not seriously compared ourselves with God's majesty!**
- ▶ **God is Big! And truly AWESOME! (in the literal sense)**

Applying What We've Learned

- ▶ Prayerfully consider what you want to get out of the class
 - ▶ And how much you want to put into it!
- ▶ What do you think of theology:
 - ▶ Avoid it?
 - ▶ Pride yourself in it?
 - ▶ Gain comfort from it?
 - ▶ Prayerfully consider your attitude

- We all evaluate ourselves:
 - By what standard?
 - How would this change if we used God as our standard?



**Take
home message*

For Small Group Discussion



- How might knowing yourself better help you to know God better?
- How might knowing God better help you to know yourself better?
- Why is theology important to Christians?

Praying What We've Learned

- *Confess pride of knowledge


- *Confess tendency to compare self to others rather than to God

- *Contemplate God's attributes

And our weakness in light of them

- *Prayers of Thanksgiving for God's Attributes



A rectangular piece of brown, textured cardboard is shown against a light green background. The text is printed in a white, serif font, arranged in three lines. The top line reads "Your mission,", the middle line reads "should you choose", and the bottom line reads "to accept it....".

Your mission,
should you choose
to accept it....

For Next
Week

Book I, Chapters 1-5