




# Knowing God, Knowing Ourselves

A Practical Survey of Calvin's  
*Institutes*

Led by Dr. Tim Sisemore



# 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?



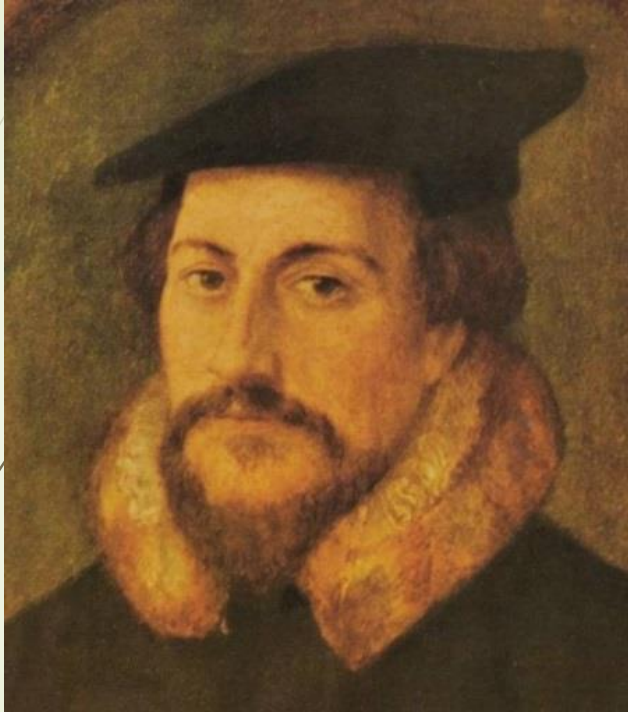
- Consider your thoughts and attitudes as we approach this study
- I invite you to give Calvin a fair hearing
- Understand before you criticize
- Be open to what the Spirit will teach us



# 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



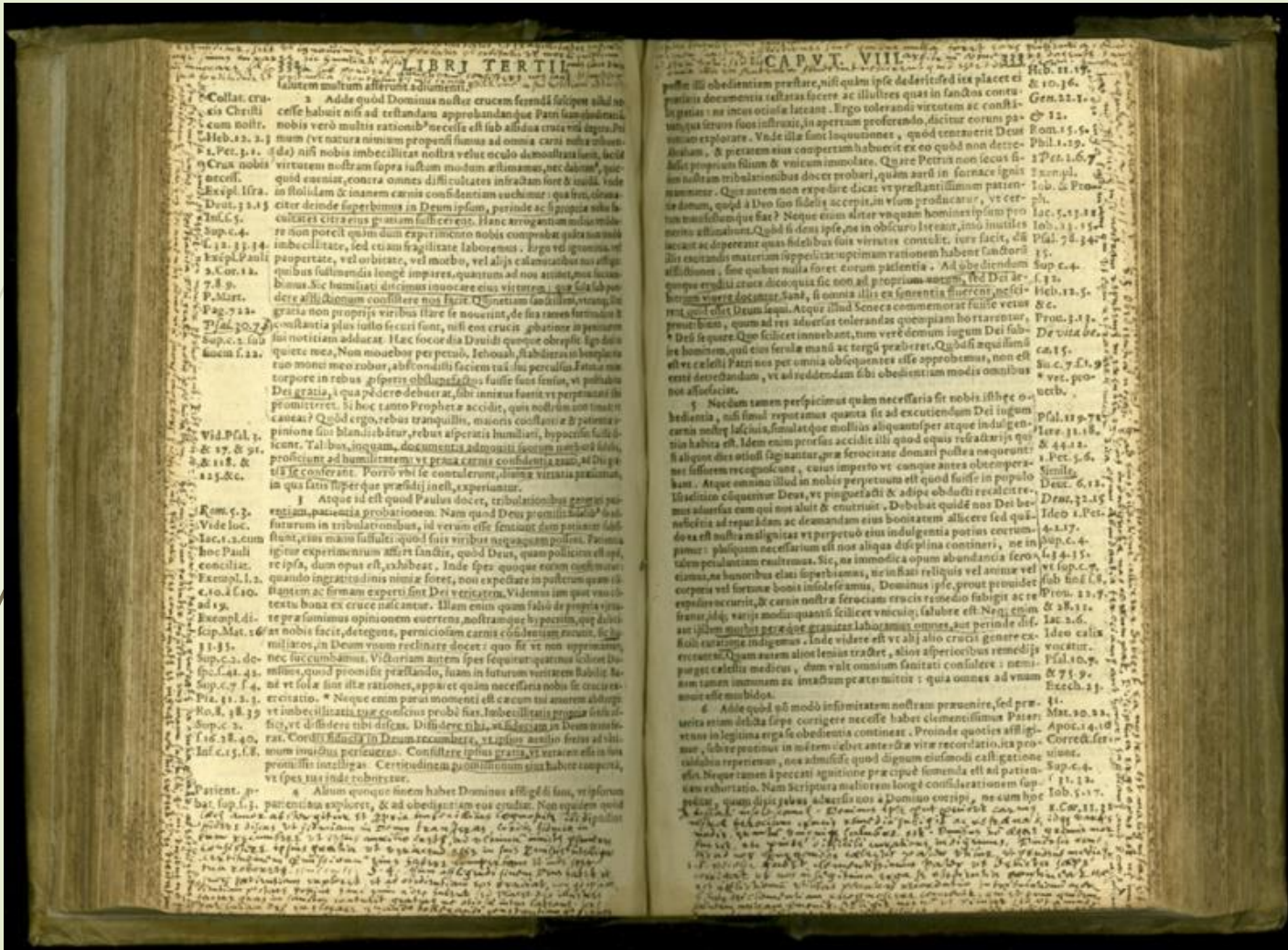
# Story of the *Institutes*

- 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 piece of brown cardboard with white text, tilted slightly to the right. The text reads: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it...."

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

For Next  
Week

Book I, Chapters 1-5