

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 58

John Calvin – Part One

Open a telephone book, look in the yellow pages under churches, and you can find multiple Presbyterian churches (from multiple Presbyterian denominations including Cumberland Presbyterian, Presbyterian Church USA, *etc.*), Churches of Christ, and Reformed Churches. Add to these churches the Church of Scotland and congregational churches. Throw in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Pilgrims, Princeton University, and you are just beginning to see the direct legacy of John Calvin.

For the next couple of classes, we shall explore John Calvin in his personal life as well as his life as a teacher, a theologian, a preacher, and a church organizer. We shall then briefly explain how this 16th century Frenchman is related to much of Protestant Christendom today.

JOHN CALVIN – BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

John Calvin (actually “Jean Calvin”) was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, to Gerard Calvin and Jeanne Le Franc. Although his parents were middle-class, Calvin still received a first class education. When Calvin was just 4 or 5 years old, his mother died. His father quickly remarried, although he died when Calvin was 22. Calvin learned Latin along with other subjects and proved himself a very good student. Originally, Calvin’s dad intended for Calvin to go into the ministry, and his education was directed toward that end. When Calvin was about 12, he left for the University of Paris where he received an arts degree, followed by a Masters degree (12 was a normal age then for pursuing such studies). While in college, however, Calvin’s father got into a tiff with the church powers and changed Calvin’s direction of study. Calvin’s new focus was on the law.

To study law, Calvin left the University of Paris and went south to study under several noted humanist scholars (“Humanist” in the 16th century context has a different meaning than it does today. The humanists were the “conservatives” in a sense. They were seeking to study and develop humanity along the lines of the ancient knowledge and sciences. They felt that culture and learning receded during the Middle Ages and the return to classical education would further society’s development.). The humanist approach was *ad fontes*, a plea to return to the fount or source of whatever was being studied. In the biblical arena, this meant a reading of the Bible in its original Greek and Hebrew rather than the Latin that had been used for the last 1,000 years.

In 1533, the 24-year-old Calvin assisted a friend (Nicolas Cop) in writing an address the friend gave as the new rector at the University of Paris. At that time, France was strongly pro-Catholic. The speech landed Cop in trouble because it was perceived to have support for the ongoing reformation ideas Luther and others propagated. Calvin feared his association with Cop and the speech might result in his arrest, and so basically, he went into hiding for the next year.

During this year, Calvin spent a good bit of time with an old French humanist scholar Jacques Lefevre (who had previously translated the Bible into French!). We do not know the details, but during this time, Calvin made a conscious decision to distance himself from the Catholic Church. Calvin returned to his boyhood home and renounced the church scholarships that had provided his income and study expenses and set out to proclaim a protestant faith.

Calvin found a quiet place with a French family that had a great library for his personal use where he spent time in 1534. But the dangers in France were growing daily. Placards against the Catholic Mass were posted throughout Paris on October 18, 1534 (including one posted on the King's bedroom door!) that caused the King to crack down on those heretical to the Catholic faith. Many were imprisoned and martyred burnings took place daily.

In light of the changed situation, Calvin decided to flee for a safer land. In January 1535, Calvin left France for Basel, Switzerland. Calvin had hoped for a safe place to quietly study and work on his writings. However, when he heard that the French were working to export their concerns of heretics in order to find and justify more killing, Calvin decided to act. There were some hopeful overtures that the King of France might find some measure of peace with the reformers (at one point, the King sought a meeting with Melancthon who we studied in lesson 51), but the meeting never came to fruition and the hope dissipated.

So, in short order, Calvin published an edition of what would be his seminal work, commonly called the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 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,¹ in Which this Book is Presented to Him as a Confession of Faith. Author, John Calvin, of Noyon. Basel, 1536.

While we might assess the *Institutes* as Calvin's core work, we need to understand both it and the other works of Calvin in light of his reasons for producing them. Calvin had major concerns for the spiritual and intellectual health of the clergy as well as ordinary Christians. There were no real seminaries that had accepted programs for training pastors. Calvin felt that the absence of pastoral training led to a church of uneducated people that would believe any superstition taught by church leaders.

Calvin's solution to this problem was to write materials for use in teaching both pastors and laymen. First among these works is the *Institutes*, which was Calvin's "101 textbook" to start training pastors in pure doctrine. From there, Calvin was concerned that the Pastors needed help in understanding how to read scripture. For that, Calvin wrote commentaries. Calvin wrote on all the New Testament, save 2 and 3 John and Revelation. Calvin used his Hebrew knowledge to write Old Testament commentaries on the five books of Moses, Joshua, the Psalms, and the Prophets (except for about half of Ezekiel).

In addition to his work training pastors, Calvin produced other materials designed to help the laity grow in true piety and doctrine. Here, Calvin wrote three editions of his Catechism (a short manual of basics for belief). Calvin also preached regularly (and at times daily!) in an effort to give ordinary people instructions on the application of scriptural truths to common everyday life.²

¹ Calvin writes an introduction to his work dedicating it to the King of France. Calvin explains that originally the work was simply a way of teaching the countrymen who were "hungering and thirsting for Christ" even though they knew next to nothing about him. But, after the arresting and burning of so many for heresy, Calvin decided to expand the book to also teach the King "the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage who today disturb your realm with fire and sword." Calvin wanted the king to learn the truth of the gospel and put a stop to the martyring of the faithful.

² Class member Dale Hearn writes the following about Calvin's preaching:

"John Calvin's preaching style is not in line with his historical reputation, as a very meticulous scholar. He usually spoke "off the cuff" and without any specific preparation for that particular sermon. He only took the Bible to the pulpit with him, so he had to have a terrific memory.

Calvin was a very colorful preacher! Calvin used illustrations from the farm, from wine making, from cooking and from city life. He complained of the fog in the morning and of certain insects that ate the inside of wheat. Instead of saying, "I blame... whoever" – he would say, "I spit in his face!" Instead of saying, "I am wrong," Calvin would say, "I deserve to have my face spit upon." Instead of saying that the Lord spurns church ceremonies, he would say, "It is as though He spat upon all those services." One thing for sure, John Calvin liked to talk about spit!

Calvin continued to edit and update his *Institutes* with new editions throughout his life. Because the *Institutes* are where we find Calvin explaining his theology, we will spend most of our time working through it. (Steel up here, theology can be tough to work through, but Calvin would tell you its important! – And on this, Calvin was right!)

JOHN CALVIN – THEOLOGY

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is available in many languages. The English translation used for this lesson is translated by Ford Lewis Battles.³ Calvin would rework the book, restructuring it as he added material and revised material throughout his life. It is clear that Calvin had an incredible gift for organization and the work reflects his orderly thinking. In its final form, the work consisted of four separate “books.” We will consider two books this week and two books next week.

Book 1- The Knowledge of God the Creator

Calvin begins his work discussing the knowledge we humans have of God. Calvin never sets out to prove God's existence. Calvin believes that all humans sense and recognize there is a God, whether or not they admit it to themselves or others. Echoing Augustine, Calvin wrote that, “The knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in the minds of men.”⁴ As we examine and consider ourselves, how we are made and gifted, for example, we are driven to knowledge of God. So, Calvin's launching point assumes the existence of God and man's recognition of that existence. Calvin's concern is *what* man understands of God and what man understands of his self.

For Calvin, our knowledge of God is linked to our self-awareness. But Calvin also saw our knowledge of ourselves connected to our knowledge of God in another way as well. It is through our knowledge of God that we come to greater

Calvin had a secretary, Denis Reguenier, from 1549 to 1560. He would take down Calvin's sermons in short hand and write them out in long hand later. He bound them up into volumes and put them into the care of deacons. He'd let anyone who wanted, to read them, if – they had his permission (THL Parker, *The Oracles of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947) Pg. 39 – 40). This comes in real handy and today, by one listing, we still have 2,023 of John Calvin's sermons.”

³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster John Knox Press 2006 edition).

⁴ *Institutes*, Book 1, 3.

knowledge of ourselves. “Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face...For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy...unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly and impurity.”⁵ Thus, Calvin urges man to compare himself to God’s majesty and so be touched and made aware of humanity’s “lowly state.”

Calvin writes that the purpose of our knowing God is to lead us into lives of purity. In fact, it is a life of purity that more fully discloses the reality of God to mankind. Calvin did not believe man should know God in an effort to satisfy intellectual curiosity. We learn of God to grow in trust and reverence.

In unfolding this idea, Calvin points out that man’s inherent knowledge of God is corrupted by both ignorance and malice. It is why many rely on superstition or make a conscious decision to turn away from God. Calvin saw this as a result of man’s efforts to make God in our image as opposed to us understanding we are made in his image.

Man is without excuse in his superstition and willful refusal to learn of God, for God is evident both in his creating the universe as well as his sustaining the universe. While making his point, Calvin liberally quotes from scripture, including Paul in Romans 1:19-20 (“what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen”). Among the creations of the universe, Calvin saw mankind as the greatest proof of divine wisdom in spite of the fact that mankind has turned ungratefully against God. As a result, mankind really cannot find God in meaningful revelation absent scripture.

Calvin saw scripture as the “needed guide and teacher for anyone who would come to God the Creator.”⁶ God chose to reveal himself throughout the pages, words, and stories contained in scripture. This is true for the scriptures we read. It was also true for the scriptures as the stories were being experienced. In other words, Abraham knew of God because God revealed himself in His wisdom putting into their lives and minds what we now have recorded as scripture. Calvin saw scripture as the Spirit’s work which would consistently reveal God in true ways, keeping those who would learn of God from error and superstition.

⁵ *Institutes*, Book 1, Ch1:2.

⁶ *Institutes*, Book 1, Ch. 6.

For scripture to have this effect in man, the Spirit must work to make the scripture come alive. This was a personal experience, Calvin taught, and not one that depended upon the church. Here, Calvin departed from the Catholic faith of the day. The Catholic Church taught that the Church came first and scripture came second.⁷ So, the primary source of knowledge and faith needed to be seen as the Church, not scripture. Calvin argued that the Word or Wisdom of God that is preserved in scripture did not postdate the church. The words and wisdom of God were lived and spoken in the world through his spirit before and during the establishment of the Church. It is our written scriptures that recorded those events of scripture that were nonetheless scripture themselves. To Calvin, even the church's adoption of the canon was recognition of what God's Spirit had done, not a pronouncement of what would be orthodox based upon the Spirit working in the Church.

Calvin does spend a chapter in Book One defending the integrity of scripture. It was important to him that people understand that the miracles truly occurred, the prophecies were fulfilled, and that the scripture had internal and eternal credibility.

While on the subject of scripture, Calvin not only took the Catholic Church to task, but also some splinter groups that believed they had new revelations from God worthy of building a faith upon. Calvin termed these people fanatics who wrongly appeal to the Holy Spirit. The Bible and the Holy Spirit were inseparably linked for Calvin. It was the Spirit that inspired the Bible. It was inconceivable that the same Spirit would then impart something new and inconsistent to Christians.

As Calvin contemplated God self-revelation in scripture, he carefully makes a point that God never reveals himself in all his Glory. God merely reveals himself as he is towards us in ways and words we can understand. For Calvin, human words, expressions, and understandings of the world are the language of God when he reveals himself to us. In essence, God is using "baby talk" as he takes his majesty and tries to explain and reveal parts of it to fallen humanity.

Calvin was concerned about mankind's constant efforts to make God something we can understand and see instead of us contemplating God's own revelation of himself. For example, Calvin saw this in man using images or pictorial representations of God. Calvin cites the commandment not to make a graven image or "any likeness" of God from Exodus 20:4. Even the image of a crucified

⁷ The idea here is that the apostles were preaching and the church was thriving before any written gospels or epistles. The thinking went further with the idea that it was the church and the church's tradition that determined what scripture would ultimately be accorded status as such. This was argued as a preeminence of the church over scripture.

savior Calvin considered sinful and damaging. For once man lays eyes on such an image, man begins to think of God as human rather than God as revealed by God.

Calvin cuts no mercy to the idea that images are “books of the uneducated.” While citing Pope Gregory for the statement, Calvin writes, “the Spirit of God declares far otherwise.”⁸ As far as Calvin is concerned, if the church did its duty, then there would be no uneducated people in need of such images for books!

Calvin spends time in his explanation of the knowledge of God dealing with the Trinity (Chapter 13). God’s nature is spiritual and not subject to any kind of human measurement. We need to read scripture to see how God describes himself. When we do, we see God wants us to consider him in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all distinct yet still one. Calvin was orthodox by Nicene standards (see lesson 19 on Nicea). Although Calvin does not seek to give a full human understanding, he does emphasize the biblical texts that establish the full divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Calvin has a lively discussion of other aspects of God’s creation. He is dogmatic in places (for example, God is Lord over *all* creation) and not dogmatic in other places (whether there are guardian angels “I dare not affirm with confidence”). Calvin teaches that angels assist us in the irreconcilable struggle between Satan and God’s kingdom. Even in this, though, Calvin states the Church is set for certain victory because Satan and all demons are under God’s power and control.

Before he closes book one, Calvin returns to discuss the nature of man. God created man spotless. Mankind can never rightfully place blame upon God for man’s sins. Yet once man sinned, his nature became deformed. Man’s body is corrupted and temporary. Man’s soul (Calvin considered this also man’s spirit) consists of two aspects, man’s understanding (mental reasoning) and man’s will. God gave man this soul both to distinguish right from wrong and to choose to do right (exercising both aspects – understanding and will). It was man’s choice, Calvin explains, to choose wrong in the Garden of Eden, thus bringing about the fallen state of humanity.

Man now finds himself in a world not only created by God, but sustained by God as well. God actively works in the world; it does not run on chance or remote control. Calvin taught against the idea of good luck or bad luck. Citing Matthew 10:30 that God knows the number of hairs on our heads, Calvin argues that everything that occurs happens with God approval. We may not understand his reasons, but we should rest confident that God is in control. We are therefore to observe God’s hand with respect. But, Calvin is careful to warn that God being in

⁸ *Institutes*, Book 1, Ch. 11:5

control should never be our license to wickedness or negligence. Calvin notes that we still have full responsibility for matters under our control.

Calvin then brings to light his view of scriptures that speak of God “repenting,” like when he repented at the time of Noah for making mankind, or repenting that he made Saul king. Calvin asserts that God is above repenting, because God never did anything wrong. The word “repent” is used to try and convey to humans in terms understood by humans certain aspects of God revealed in history. “Because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it.”⁹

Book 2 – The Knowledge of God the Redeemer

In Book 2, Calvin discusses our knowledge of God as the redeemer of mankind. He begins this discussion explaining that in the fall and revolt of Adam, all of humanity was out under a curse. Mankind was degenerated from its goodness in creation and all humanity was forever tainted with sin. For Calvin, the original sin of Adam was, at its core, unfaithfulness. It resulted in the death of Adam’s soul. This death and its consequences are born by each generation. The consequences of sin are found in everyone from the moment of conception, and this sin turns man into a derangement of what God intended.

From the fall, man lost his ability to choose righteousness. Instead of having free choice on matters of sin, man is now in servitude and bondage to sin. Harkening back to his teaching that the soul consists of understanding and will, Calvin asserts that both were corrupted in the fall. Man cannot understand as he should nor can man choose to do good works on his own. For Calvin, to suggest that man has free will is to deny God his honor as our redeemer. Calvin cites approvingly John Chrysostom (lesson 30) and Augustine (lessons 25 and 26) for the premise that humility should be the badge of those who seek understanding, not the arrogance that comes hand in hand with teaching of free will.

While the fall brought an end to mankind’s supernatural gifts and abilities that Calvin believed existed in the Garden, and while the fall corrupted the natural gifts man had, enough of man’s reason remained after the fall to distinguish humanity from “brute beasts.” We should see this understanding as a gift from God and use it accordingly. Here Calvin explains that science has a role in society as a gift from God, which we should use to God’s good, ends with praise and glory going to him in the process. This includes medicine, engineering, mathematics and other areas of study.

⁹ *Institutes* Book 1, Ch 17:13.

Man has spiritual blindness in regards to God that needs enlightening. Referencing John 1:4-5 (“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”), Calvin notes that humanity on its own is “utterly blind and stupid in divine matters.”¹⁰

With that as background, Calvin then asserts that man’s knowledge of God comes about by God’s work, not man’s. Using passages like 1 Corinthians 12:3 (“no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”) and John 6:44 (“No one can come to me unless it be granted by my Father.”), Calvin starts to lay out a foundation he will return to later in an effort to support his views on predestination (which we will cover in the next lesson!)

For Calvin, the Holy Spirit is the necessary daily experience for all believers so that they might discern good from evil, might understand the way that God would lead them, and might have the will to follow that path. Man’s own nature does not produce any worthy fruit for God, only things appropriate for Hell’s fire. Calvin uses the same psalms (14:1-3 and 53:1-3) Paul uses in Romans 3:10-16 to point out that no human even does one good deed on his own.

Calvin teaches that the bondage of man and his will leaves the work of redemption up to God alone. Calvin distinguishes between a believer “co-operating” with God’s grace as opposed to being actuated or converted by God’s grace.

Calvin then proceeds to discuss how Satan goes to work in the hearts of man. Satan seeks to blind man and harden his heart. Men willingly choose to stand under Satan and his influence. Yet, Calvin sees that God is at work, even through the diabolical schemes of Satan. God works beyond Satan to ultimately see his good purposes brought to fruition.

In chapter five of book two, Calvin addresses the common arguments put out against his positions and in defense of free will. Calvin works through a number of scriptures that seem to support free will while at the same time emphasizing those scriptures that seem to support his view.

From there, Calvin works through the substantial scriptures in the Old Testament that bore witness to Christ and his work long before the incarnation. Jesus as Mediator was the promise of the Old Testament and Calvin taught that faith in God was in fact Faith in Christ. Hence, the Old Testament faith we read of was a saving faith in Jesus.

¹⁰ *Institutes*, Book 2, Ch 11:19.

This was also the purpose of God giving the law in the Old Testament. It served to lead mankind to Christ the Redeemer (as Paul wrote in Galatians 3). The law strips mankind of excuses, for we know how we should live and behave and yet we are unable to do so on our own. Seeing and understanding those failures should drive man to despair and to seek grace from God.

Calvin taught that the law had a secondary purpose beyond directing us to Jesus. The law also served as a restraint to protect the community from unjust men. Here, Calvin saw an important use of the law even in his day. The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were no longer of use since in Christ all the ceremonies have their fulfillment. The ethics laws, however, are still what believers should seek to meet, under the strength and direction of God's Spirit. Not only that, but in Christ and through the Spirit we now have a better and fuller understanding of the Law. This was the teaching of Christ, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount. While the law forbids murder, Jesus forbids hatred. Christ has restored the right understanding of the law.

Calvin takes time to work through the Ten Commandments and explain their importance and meaning in his day and time.

For Calvin, the Jews knew Jesus under the law, but he was clearly revealed only in the gospel. So, Calvin turns to the gospel and the new covenant to explain and teach about the redemptive work of Christ. Referencing John the Baptist, Calvin explains that the work of Christ in redemption is a covenant relationship between God and us that was also set out in the Old Testament. Calvin finds that in the faith of Abraham and his descendants. Calvin points out that they were declared righteous by their faith, not by their deeds. Calvin walks through David, Job, Ezekiel, and others showing the Old Testament ties to Christian faith.

With all that said, Calvin does point out 5 major differences in the Old and New Testaments: (1) The Old Testament stresses temporal benefits of spiritual blessings as opposed to eternal ones; (2) the Old Testament used images and ceremonies to convey the truths of Christ; (3) the Old Testament contained the literal law while the New Testament has the spiritual; (4) the Old Testament is a book for those under bondage to sin while the New Testament is one of freedom; and, (5) the Old Testament was centered on one nation while the New Testament is to all nations (Book 2, Chapter 11).

In chapter 12, Calvin discusses why Christ had to become a man to effectuate mankind's redemption. For Calvin, a mediator between God and Man capable of bridging the gulf between the two must be both truly God and truly man. It would

take someone truly God to be fully obedient to God, and it would take someone truly man to pay the penalty in our stead.¹¹

Many times throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin goes back to basic church orthodoxy quoting from the great councils as well as Augustine and other significant persons in church history. On the issue of Christ, Calvin dedicates an entire chapter toward the scriptural basis for understanding Christ fully human and fully divine as set forth at the Council of Chalcedon (see lesson 31).

The saving work of Christ is set out in three ways: as prophet, priest, and king. Jesus is called “Messiah” because the word means “anointed,” something done to both prophets and kings. Jesus was anointed as both. As Prophet, we have Jesus proclaiming the Word of God to his people. As King, we have Jesus exercising dominion over all for eternity. As Priest, we have Jesus reconciling us to God and interceding on our behalf. In these three ways, Calvin teaches that Christ has fulfilled the function of Redeemer and acquired our salvation in heaven as well as our victory over death.

Calvin concludes book two working through the Apostle’s Creed, even spending a section on the importance of Jesus “ascending into Hell.”

POINTS FOR HOME

Much of what Calvin wrote is what many Protestants today would consider “basic fundamental theology.” Now certainly, there are disputes on issues of free will, predestination, and other matters that we will discuss more fully next week, but we are missing much of Calvin’s importance if we fail to stop and recognize that these “basics” are “basics” because Calvin wrote them, they were published, and they had an immense impact on the church. With that in mind, our points for home could easily be the 500 or so scriptures that Calvin used to justify much of what we covered today. Instead, we will stick with the simple basics:

1. “God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). Sin separated man from God leaving man and the earth under a curse. As Paul put it, “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...” (Rom. 5:12).

¹¹ Here and in other places, Calvin takes time in his *Institutes* to address the problems he sees in not just the Catholic Church, but others as well. Calvin takes issues with teachings of Anabaptist leaders and other “Protestants.”

2. Yet, mankind has not been left in that state. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, paid the price and brought righteousness back to those whose faith and trust are placed in him. Paul continues the Romans passage from above adding, “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life to all men” (Rom. 5:18).
3. So, the law brings us to Christ as a tutor or nanny prepares a child in learning. The “law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).