

John Calvin and His Book

The Protestant Reformation was impossible without the printing press, for its leaders were among the first to exploit the new technology to challenge and to change the status quo. Indeed, the first of the Protestant Reformers really to make use of printing was the first of the Protestant Reformers, i.e., Martin Luther. During the late Middle Ages, there had been all sorts of “heretics,” but none of them had had the impact of Martin Luther. So what was the difference between, say, John Hus in the 1400’s and Martin Luther a century later? Of course, they said somewhat different things, but it was not the content of their criticism of the church that led to different outcomes. Many who heard what Hus stood for embraced his cause, and the same was true of Luther. Both men were powerful personalities who attracted intense, loyal followings. But the printing press made it possible to multiply the number of those exposed to Luther way beyond anything that Hus could have imagined. Hundreds of titles from Luther’s pen, printed in thousands of copies, affected the way in which tens of thousands of people understood the nature of the Christian religion. And they were all over the place, not just Wittenberg (Luther’s town) or Saxony (Luther’s territory) or even Germany (Luther’s homeland) but all over Europe from Scandinavia to Italy, from Spain to Poland. The printing press made it possible for Luther’s ideas to spread from one end of the continent to the other.

And Luther was hardly alone. There were dozens of other writers addressing many of the same topics if not in precisely the same ways – people whose views were likewise being magnified by the printing press across the course of the sixteenth century; and one consequence was the restructuring of institutional Christianity. Not only did people learn to believe and to behave in new ways, they also experienced new forms of worship and new patterns of authority. Instead of a Christendom united (at least in theory) under the bishop of Rome, i.e., the pope, the Church

in the West splintered into subgroups, some competing and some cooperating, but no longer one Church but churches, with the Protestant ones usually organized to coincide with political boundaries. And at the center of this transformation was the printing press or better, the product of the printing press, not only books but pamphlets and broadsheets as well.

So to select but one title from all the possibilities in the “religious revolution” of early modern Europe is a challenge to say the least; and the first thing to recognize about any selection is that whatever its specific merits, one should see it first of all as part of a much larger and complicated whole. Thus the work in the university’s Remnant Trust exhibit that represents this period, the 1611 English translation of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, is just one title from among the thousands that were published in Europe in this period as part and parcel of the Protestant Reformation, just one contribution from the printing press that was instrumental in transforming Christianity in Europe.

But now – what about this book? Just what is so special about Calvin’s *Institutes*? Or perhaps we should ask first, just what is so special about John Calvin? After all, Calvin was but one of several Protestant leaders who came *after* Martin Luther; and by the time Calvin actually became a Protestant, Luther and others had already articulated the fundamental themes of the Protestant religion, the princes of the Empire had already presented the first great confession of Protestantism at the Diet of Augsburg, Protestant churches were already in the process of forming, and Henry VIII was well on his way to breaking with Rome. So Calvin belonged to the *second* generation of Reformers, and his conversion from medieval religion was to a Protestantism that already existed. This is not to deny that John Calvin was a creative theologian but simply to point out that he exercised his creativity within religious pa-

rameters that Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, Bucer et al – the first generation of Reformers – had already established.

When still a young man in his 20's, therefore, Calvin embraced what these others had already confessed; and so, much – maybe even everything – that one finds in the *Institutes* one can find first in the works Calvin's predecessors. Nonetheless, other than Martin Luther, it is difficult to name another Reformer of the period who was more important than John Calvin. His accomplishments were great and his influence has been enormous. John Calvin is a towering figure in the story of western civilization, primarily on account of the ideas inherited from others but articulated and implemented so effectively by him. Others may have written on the same topics, but nobody in the Protestant cause did so with as much clarity, force, and persuasiveness as Calvin.

Philip Melanchthon, Luther's associate in Reformation at the University of Wittenberg, is known as the "preceptor" or "educator" of Germany on account of his singular influence on curriculum and teaching in early modern Germany. But Calvin was the "preceptor" of Protestantism, and his fundamental ideas regarding the nature of Christianity were at the center of clergy education in Protestant churches for generations. Even his opponents recognized his influence not least of all by the frequency with which they denounced him. If John Knox the Scottish Reformer could describe Calvin's Geneva as "the nearest perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles,"¹ then Thomas Stapleton, a sixteenth century apologist for the Catholic Church, could compare Calvin to "a bestly sowe" who disdains a garden of sweet flowers and pleasant herbs in order to "nouse" and "tumble" in the filth of a "donghell or heape of rotten wedes."²

¹ As quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, rev. ed., vol. 2: *The Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 465.

² Thomas Stapleton, "A Discours upon the Doctrine of the Protestants," in *The Apologie of Fridericus Staphylus*, reprint ed. (Antwerp: John Latius, 1565; reprint, Ilkley, Yorkshire: The Scholar Press, 1975), fo. 189v.

During the Enlightenment, Voltaire portrayed Calvin as a petty tyrant and bigot whose persecution of religious dissidents had earned him the abyss of hell,³ but Rousseau's judgment was quite different. About his fellow Genevan, he wrote, "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognize the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much credit as his *Institutes*....So long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence."⁴

Even in more recent times, Calvin is routinely praised or denounced. In the 1930's, for example, Stephan Zweig portrayed Calvin as a ruthless dictator, almost an Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin:

Calvin...was backed by thousands and tens of thousands, and equipped with all the powers of the State? A master of the art of organization, Calvin had been able to transform a whole city, a whole State...into a rigidly obedient machine; had been able to extirpate independence, and to lay an embargo on freedom of thought in favour of his own exclusive doctrine. The powers of the State were under his supreme control; as wax in his hands were the various authorities....His doctrine had become law, and anyone who ventured to question it was soon taught--...by the arguments of every spiritual tyranny, by jail, exile, or burning at the stake--how in Geneva only one truth was valid, the truth of which Calvin was the prophet.⁵

Another, more recent historian, however, impressed by Calvin's "remarkable ability to master languages, media and ideas, his insights into the importance of organization and social structures, and his intuitive grasp of the religious needs and possibilities of his era," has compared Calvin's influence upon subsequent eras to that of Lenin, Marx,

³ Voltaire, "Philosophical Dictionary," in *Candide and Other Writings*, ed. Haskell M. Block, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, 1956), 398.

⁴ *Du contrat social* (1762), 2, 7n. in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lesser G. Crocker (New York, 1967), 44n. Quoted in John Witte, Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39.

⁵ Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy, or, How John Calvin Killed a Conscience: Castellio against Calvin*, on-line edition. http://www.gospeltruth.net/heresy/heresy_intro.htm. Accessed March 3, 2009.

and even Jesus Christ, because “the ideas, outlook and structures developed by Calvin proved capable of generating and sustaining a movement which transcended the limitations of his historical location and personal characteristics.” So, according to Alister McGrath, John Calvin has left an indelible mark on economics and politics, scientific thought and the arts, as well as theology.⁶ One might conclude, therefore, that love him or hate him, one has to deal with him when interested in the course of western civilization since the Reformation.

Of course, this begs a number of important questions regarding historical explanations. Whether, in fact, it is possible or even right to explain the course of civilization by resorting to a handful of prominent persons instead of impersonal forces like the economic or social systems or whether great ideas are the cause or consequence of social transformations? Questions like these deserve an answer but not by me – at least not here. Instead, I am assuming what is implicit in the exhibit itself and that is, that ideas matter, especially when their dissemination in printed form coincides with great changes in history; and that the ideas themselves are best understood in the context of those who developed and promoted them, in this case John Calvin, preacher and teacher of Protestantism.

Of course, simply to recognize that Calvin was above all a *religious* thinker is to raise yet another challenge for historical explanations that address themselves to “a secular age” like our own, and that is, how to find significance in ideas that reflect a God-consciousness so very, very different from ours. Certainly, it is still possible to be religious in 21st century America, and many of us are; but it is impossible to be religious in the same way as in the 16th century. That world was saturated with the divine, and it was to the supernatural that people had automatic and

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), xi-xii, and especially chapter 12, “Calvin and the Shaping of Modern Western Culture,” 247-61.

routine recourse when attempting to explain the phenomena of earthly existence. So, for example, when Henry VIII's wife had experienced six failed pregnancies, the king of England did not just ask physicians to find out what was wrong with his wife's body, he also asked what was wrong with his own life that God was punishing him so, and he did not find his answers in a medical manual but in the Bible, the book of Leviticus, and in his own illicit marriage.

So we need to cultivate a degree of historical imagination in order to appreciate the significance of a religious tome like the *Institutes*; and even if today, we think it important on account of its influence in politics and economics, we need to remember that the first several generations of readers appreciated it most of all for what it taught them about God. We may think that Calvin's ideas facilitated the development of capitalism or representative government or some other facet of our world, but Calvin wrote his book in order to instruct people about God and His attitude toward them. Calvin's influence upon history is a result of the fact that he was a theologian at a time when theology mattered and mattered a lot.

But then again, maybe "theologian" is not the best word for what Calvin was, especially if it calls to mind just a thinker and writer, an academician perhaps who devotes himself to the study of God and religion. We have such people today, for the most part residing in universities and seminaries; but that's not what Calvin was. It is certainly what he wanted to be, at least in terms of the 16th century, a man devoted to his studies and writing, since he preferred privacy and obscurity to the tasks of church leadership and reform. But, as he himself noted, God had other plans for John Calvin. He wrote, "Whilst my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God so led me about through different turnings and changes, that he never permitted me to

rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, he brought me forth to public notice.”⁷

From Calvin’s perspective, God acted to put him into the service of the Church by means of William Farel, virtually the first Protestant preacher in the city of Geneva. By the time Calvin came to Geneva in 1536, intending only to pass a single night in the city on his way to Strassburg, there to settle and devote himself to his private studies, Farel among others had persuaded the Genevans to embrace Protestantism – or at least to reject Catholicism. They had ejected the bishop and abolished the mass but had not yet adopted a confession of faith nor set up a church organization. So Farel needed help.

Just a few months earlier, Calvin had published the *first* edition of the *Institutes*, so that when Farel learned that the author of that little gem was in Geneva and, upon meeting Calvin, discovered that his purpose for going to Strassburg was not especially pressing, he urged Calvin to join him in the work of practical reform right there in Geneva. But the young “theologian” demurred, i.e., until Farel adopted a tactic especially powerful in an age of religion. For he laid a curse upon Calvin’s plan of privacy, study, and writing when there was such great need in Geneva. We do not know the manner with which Farel delivered his message, but whether it was soft and solemn or loud and fierce, Calvin found it persuasive. He stayed in Geneva, convinced that Farel’s voice was the voice of God.

Later on, the government of Geneva expelled them both from the city, so that for over three years Calvin went to work elsewhere. But Calvin did not believe that human beings could destroy a relationship that God had created, so he wrote at the time, “God, when he gave [the Church of Geneva] to me in charge, ...bound me to be faithful to it forev-

⁷ John Calvin, “The Author’s Preface to the Commentary on the Book of Psalms,” in *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 26.

er.”⁸ Invited to return therefore in 1541, Calvin came back and spent the rest of his life in Geneva, employed as a pastor and teacher.

This means, then, that Calvin’s theology was the reflection of a man seriously engaged in the care of souls; and he spent much of his time doing the kinds of things that Christian clergy always do: baptizing, communing, preaching, teaching, and exhorting the faithful to Christian living. Now, it’s possible, of course, that people might have embraced Calvin’s cause if he had not been a practicing pastor or even if he had been a failure in Geneva. But there is something appealing about reading the advice of someone “who’s been there” and not only that but has been persistent at it and finally successful. For after many long, difficult years of ministry, Calvin and his supporters had remade Geneva into a refuge for Protestant exiles and a model for Protestant churches. Calvin’s works therefore reflect his work in Geneva.

But what about those works, those written works? In the midst of all his practical activities did Calvin find time to write very much? Indeed, yes, and an enormous amount of material flowed forth from his pen, so that his works in the 19th century critical edition fill 59 volumes.⁹ Among the various genre that Calvin employed were – as one might expect – sermons and letters (to co-religionists all over Europe, including to many of the politically powerful) – but also tracts and treatises on theological subjects, many of them polemical; commentaries on most of the books of the Bible (had he lived longer he might have done them all), and, of course, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Clearly, the demands on Calvin’s time and energy were enormous and his written works impressive, but the *Institutes* represented a work to which the Reformer returned again and again and again. In fact, over the course of his career, he published five different editions in Latin from

⁸ John Calvin, “Reply to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva,” in Dillenberger, 83.

⁹ G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, eds., *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, 59 books in 58 volumes (Brunswick and Berlin: Braunschweig, 1863-1900).

1536 to 1559 and four separate editions in French from 1541 to 1560. It really was the work of a lifetime, because every edition incorporated new material and often new arrangements of the material, so concerned was Calvin that it accomplish his purposes for its readers.¹⁰

Furthermore, right from the beginning, other Protestants recognized the value of Calvin's *Institutes* so that both the Latin and the French editions were frequently reprinted and translations into other languages appeared as well. Already in 1540, a Spanish version of Calvin's first edition appeared and in 1557, an Italian version based on Calvin's French edition was also forthcoming. In 1560, Dutch Protestants produced one in their own language based on Calvin's last Latin edition; in 1572, the Germans followed suit; Czech and Hungarian versions appeared early in the 17th century.

The English also welcomed Calvin's work. As early as 1549, a small portion of the *Institutes* (3.6-10) had appeared as *The Life and Communicacion of a Christen Man*; but not until May 6, 1561, was the entire work forthcoming. Nonetheless, this was less than two years after the Latin had been printed in Geneva. A second English edition appeared in 1562; and a third improved edition in 1574. In each case the translator was the same, viz., Thomas Norton (1532-84), a minor figure in the literary and religious affairs of the day. In 1561, for example, a play that he and another author had written was produced, *The Tragedy of Gorboduc* – sometimes described as the first English tragedy and certainly a direct predecessor to Shakespeare's work for its use of blank verse in English drama. But Norton, a lawyer by profession, was also a committed Protestant, indeed one of the first Puritans, given that he spent time in jail on account of his criticism of bishops. In 1555, he married the daughter of Thomas Cranmer, former archbishop of Canterbury but by that time under arrest and awaiting execution by Queen

¹⁰ Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 195-202.

Mary. After the restoration of Protestantism by Elizabeth, Norton served in Parliament and participated in the trials of Roman Catholics. He also translated psalms into verse that became a part of the English metrical psalter (Sternhold and Hopkins) and Alexander Nowell's catechism into English, a widely used statement of Protestant faith.

And it is Norton's translation of Calvin's *Institutes*, printed in 1611, that is on display in the university's exhibit. Between 1574 and 1611, there had been four additional editions. This makes the 1611 edition the eighth English edition – which is rather remarkable, given the size of the volume and the complexity of the subject matter.¹¹

But what exactly is this book that Protestants throughout Europe found so attractive and that Calvin himself took such pains to produce? Interestingly, Calvin's own purposes for the *Institutes* changed significantly between the first and second editions. Initially, in 1536, Calvin intended for his book to provide an introduction to the Christian religion. Calvin later explained that much to his surprise when he was still a new Protestant (indeed, less than a year after his conversion), “all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me, although I was but as yet a mere novice and tyro.” Early on, therefore, people recognized Calvin's gifts as a teacher. And so the first edition of the *Institutes* was but an introduction to the Christian faith, “a small treatise containing a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion.”¹² Later, that would change.

A contemporary described the first edition as a “catechism” and naming it an *Institutio* suggested the same thing, since this was a word that others had used either in the sense of “instruction” or “principles.”¹³

¹¹ Information regarding the various editions and translations comes from the “Introduction” to John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Phil.: Westminster Press, 1960) 1:xxxviii-xlv.

¹² Calvin, “Preface to Psalms,” 26-27.

¹³ McGrath, 136-37

The full title also summarized the original purpose of the work, “Institutes of the Christian Religion, Embracing almost the whole sum of piety, & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety, and recently published.”¹⁴ In short, Calvin wanted to present the essentials of the Christian religion for anybody who was concerned about believing the right things and living the right way.

Both in its content and form, the first edition was strongly influenced by Martin Luther; and in fact, the 1536 *Institutes* follows almost exactly the organization of Luther’s catechisms, prepared a few years earlier by the German Reformer likewise to present the essentials. Like Luther, then, Calvin arranged his materials this way: (1) 10 Commandments; (2) Apostles’ Creed; (3) the Lord’s Prayer; and (4) the sacraments. Then, he concluded with a final chapter dealing with Christian liberty, church power, and civil government.

Three years later, however, when Calvin published a second edition of the *Institutes* (1539), he shifted its purpose from a catechism or manual of instruction in the essentials. Although he would continue to write catechisms for instruction in the basics, he now decided to rewrite the *Institutes* “for *prospective theologians* to prepare them and instruct them for reading the divine Word so that they might have easy access to it and proceed smoothly along each step” [emphasis mine].¹⁵ Just about the same time, Calvin also began writing commentaries on the books of the Bible. Calvin had complained about similar works by his contemporaries, Melanchthon and Bucer, on account of their complexity and length, often occasioned by incorporating much tangential material that was doctrinal or polemical in nature. Calvin’s plan, therefore, was to omit

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), title page.

¹⁵ CO 1:cols. [255-56]. “Porro hoc mihi in isto labore propositum fuit: sacrae theologiae candidatos ad divini verbi lectionem ita praeparare et instruere, ut et facilem ad eam adytum habere, et inoffenso in ea gradu pergere queant.”

such material from his commentaries so as to keep them relatively brief and to the point while at the same time putting that material into another kind of book entirely, i.e., the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a book that would provide a more comprehensive and systematic treatment of Christian doctrine as well as answers to its critics. Students of theology, therefore, would have a guide for reading the Scriptures in the *Institutes* as well as linguistic and theological insights on particular texts in Calvin's commentaries. For the rest of his life, Calvin would work at accomplish both purposes by producing both kinds of books..¹⁶

With the shift in purpose in 1539, the *Institutes* began to expand in size and complexity until by the 1559 edition it was almost five times as big as the original.¹⁷ This made it about the same size as the Old Testament plus the first three gospels in the Christian Bible. But besides the new material, Calvin had also entirely reorganized the material.

Anyone who has written a long piece of work knows that keeping it organized is one of the major challenges, so Calvin's success in doing so was one of his real triumphs and it constitutes one of the reasons for the *Institutes* success. Other Protestant leaders of the 16th century also wrote major compendia of biblical theology, but none of them mastered the challenges of organization the way Calvin did.¹⁸ Not that it came easy; for in fact, only in the final Latin edition did Calvin claim, "I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth."¹⁹ In that edition, he divided the *Institutes* into four books, perhaps influenced by a medieval precedent, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. He also followed in a general way the order of the Apostles' Creed with Book 1 treating the knowledge of God the Creator, Book 2 the knowledge of

¹⁶ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27-29.

¹⁷ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 128.

¹⁸ See McGrath, 138-40, for a discussion of this point along with an indictment of Melancthon's organization of his *Loci*.

¹⁹ Calvin, McNeill/Battles *Institutes*, 1:3.

God the Redeemer in Christ, Book 3 the reception and effects of receiving the grace of Christ (i.e., the work of the Holy Spirit), and finally Book 4 the means God uses to bring us to Christ (i.e., the nature and work of the Church). He also divided each book into chapters (80 in all) for which he provided summary titles. In this way the reader could more easily follow his argument.

Certainly, therefore, the skill with which Calvin presented his material was key to its favorable reception. Even more important, however, than its organization in explaining the historical significance of the *Institutes* are its ideas; for Calvin articulated a version of the Christian religion that responded to the spiritual needs and longings of many in his own times and, to a certain extent, I suppose, in our own times as well. Although it is not possible adequately to summarize Calvin's theology in just one afternoon lecture, we need to say something about the contents of the *Institutes*, to which so many have committed themselves over the centuries. For John Calvin himself, the *Institutes* were simply a presentation of divine truth, based on the Holy Scriptures. They represented his beliefs, but they were not his ideas. The ideas, the teachings, came from the Bible. For Calvin, that was the real reason for reading and studying the *Institutes*.

But, of course, there's lots of material in the Christian Bible, so Calvin had to pick and choose as well as organize; so at the outset of his work, Calvin enunciated an overarching theme: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man – neither of them, he contended, really possible without the other and both of them at the center of biblical revelation. On the one hand, Calvin taught that man is a creature, i.e., not self-subsisting or self-explaining, but solely the consequence of God's creative activity. Therefore, everything that human beings have or are is a result of God's will. Calvin also believed that humanity occupied a privileged place in the universe as God's steward of the natural world and that

therefore, God had endowed humans with remarkable talents and abilities as evidenced by their achievements over the ages. Humanity's value, worth, and identity – which are considerable – all come from God.

On the other hand, however, Calvin also taught that man is a *flawed* creature, indeed a *fallen* creature, someone who at the beginning of time forfeited a right relationship with the Creator in order to follow his own desires, satisfy his own lusts, and invent his own religion. The fall into sin has resulted in a world filled with sin and wickedness, tragedy and misfortune, a world that cannot right itself but must suffer the consequences of human depravity unless God should intervene in order to set things right. Only if God wills can people escape a fate of death and damnation. They cannot do it by themselves.

For Calvin also taught the sovereignty of God. Things are the way they are because God has so willed them. Nonetheless, in spite of a world filled with human depravity and its consequences, Calvin also insisted on the essential goodness of God – a goodness that God manifests in the wonders of nature (the beauty and beneficence of creation), but even more importantly in the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ. For Calvin, Jesus Christ is the One by whom God has acted to restore fallen human beings to right relationship with Him. First of all, Jesus was the perfect Mediator between human beings and their Creator on account of who He was. On the one hand, Calvin affirmed that Jesus was true God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and, on the other, Calvin insisted that Jesus was also a true human being. In His person, therefore, He brought humanity and divinity together. But secondly, by His work – especially His death upon the cross – Jesus satisfied God's righteous anger against human sin. In His body, He experienced death, in His soul the pangs of hell. By His passion, He paid the price of human redemption; and, by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus also demonstrated His triumph, His victory over sin, death, and devil and so prepared the way not only for a renewed relationship between people and their Creator

but also for resurrection and life eternal at the end of time. The gift of God to His people consists of forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and life everlasting – all made possible for them through the work of Christ.

And all this was God's will, His merciful will, His good and gracious will. But it was also God's will that only some people should receive the fruits of Christ's work by being brought to faith in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Others, God condemned to remain in their sins and so to suffer the consequence of sin, viz., eternal damnation. In the latter instance He was demonstrating justice by damning not the innocent but sinners (willing sinners, we might add), but in the former, He was showing His love by rescuing undeserving sinners on the basis of pure grace, i.e., unmerited favor toward sinners in Christ. In either case, according to Calvin, either by His justice or by His mercy, God is glorified.

For many today, this particular teaching of Calvin – usually called predestination – is a major stumbling block. Most people want and think that they have some measure of control over their own destiny. They want to be masters of their own fate; but self-determination of that sort is not a part of Calvin's system. God does not take directions from people, He gives them. Nevertheless, however much people today are uncomfortable with predestination, in Calvin's times especially, there were many who found this doctrine comforting: amidst all the vagaries of the world and confronted by human weakness, both material and moral, people were glad to know that God's power stood behind His promises and that God had chosen them for salvation in Jesus Christ. As the elect of God, they could face all the challenges of human existence with confidence and hope because in Christ they knew they would always overcome.

But what should they do practically as they faced the challenges of the human condition? How should human beings actually live? Calvin did not ignore this question at all. Indeed, he is famous for transforming

Geneva into a model Protestant city, and his *Institutes* address questions of Christian life style, for in Calvin's mind God's plan of salvation, including predestination, did not result in passivity but quite the opposite, in activity, an earthly life that glorified God by serving one's neighbor. Of course, Luther had said much the same thing; but there is a significant difference in emphasis between the two men and the churches that followed them. This can be seen, for example, in differences regarding the Law of God.

Although sixteenth century Lutherans acknowledged a place for God's Law in the lives of Christians, they nonetheless insisted that its chief purpose was *not* to provide directions for Christian living but by the severity of its demands to show people that they were sinners. Calvin, on the other hand, while agreeing that the Law *does* reveal human sin, insisted that its main purpose "finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns" in that they "learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire" and also are "aroused to obedience." "Even for a spiritual man," Calvin wrote, "not yet free of the weight of the flesh the law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still." It functions, therefore, as a goad as well as instruction for consistent Christian living. (2.7.12; 360-61).

And consistent Christian living was what Calvin expected from the people of Geneva, so he spent a great deal of his time working with the pastors and elders of the church in Geneva on the consistory, basically a morals court for the city. Meeting once a week, it dealt with issues large and small and was a busy place. Some of the accusations that the consistory heard were specifically religious. For example, one woman possessed a copy of the lives of the saints; a barber had given a tonsure to a priest; and a goldsmith had made a chalice for the Catholic mass. People also got into trouble for moral matters – drunkenness, prostitution, and gambling. Sometimes they were charged with showing disrespect to religious or civil authorities. One man, for example, got into trouble for

naming his dog “Calvin.” Most of the time, the consistory dealt with such matters by admonitions, exhortations, and even by what we might call “counseling.” However, there were also charges regarding things that the state considered crimes – heresy, adultery, witchcraft, and sedition. These matters were referred to city government for final disposition. For a long time, Calvin and his supporters claimed that the consistory also had the right of excommunicating people – the ultimate church sanction but with serious social consequences as well. On account of the latter, Calvin’s opponents claimed that excommunication belonged finally to the civil authorities. This dispute created a lot of tension during the first several years of Calvin’s ministry; and only in 1555 did the Reformer prevail on this matter, after which the consistory used excommunication effectively to get people either to conform to a Protestant lifestyle or else leave the city.²⁰

To a certain extent, Calvin was attempting to put into force the ethical code that the Church had taught since the earliest days of the Christian religion. After all, Protestants were not the first Christians to denounce adultery as sinful; but in many instances, the Calvinists were more successful in enforcing the code than their medieval predecessors had been. However, one would probably not describe such efforts as “revolutionary.” But it was also true that the Calvinist code differed with the medieval way of life in many significant ways, so much so that in Protestant lands there developed a new way of life and social institutions to support it.

For one thing, Calvin repudiated a lot of what was central to religious and social existence in the Middle Ages, e.g., the cult of the dead, i.e., purgatory and all the forms and rituals that bound together the living with their dead relatives in a middle place between heaven and hell. But Calvin denounced it as “a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the

²⁰ Spitz 2:426-27; *OER* s.v. “Consistory.”

cross of Christ, inflicts unbearable contempt for God's mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith." But if purgatory went, so did everything connected with it – prayers for the dead, votive masses, and indulgences to mention some of the most prominent. All a waste of time and money, as far as Calvin was concerned, since the dead went either to heaven or to hell. They were in the hands of God and out of the hands of people. (3.5.6; 676).

Calvin also rejected the cult of the saints, the idea that while most of the faithful dead were still suffering for their sins in purgatory, a few had made it into heaven where they were available as intercessors to bring heaven's help to people still left on earth with all their problems. Much medieval piety was centered on the saints – prayers, sacred images, special days; pilgrimages – but this too Calvin denounced in no uncertain terms: "It was the height of stupidity, not to say madness, to be so intent on gaining access [to God] through the saints as to be led away from [Christ], apart from whom no entry lies open to them." Relying upon the saints, taught Calvin, dishonored Christ and obscured His glory, because in Him and only in Him access to God as Father was complete. (3.20.21; 879).

Another big part of medieval religion that Calvin rejected was monasticism – the religious life that had attracted so many men and women during the Middle Ages into lifelong service to the Church as monks and nuns. Thomas Aquinas had characterized taking religious vows as a second baptism. Here again, however, Calvin thought that the Medieval Church had promoted something completely non-Christian. Calvin brought three charges against the monks:

First, because it is their intention to establish a new and forged worship to merit God's favor, I conclude...that whatever they vow is abominable in God's sight. Second, because they invent any mode of life they please without regard for God's call and without his approval, I say that this is a rash and therefore unlawful enterprise....Moreover, when they bind themselves to many acts of worship at once perverted and impious,...I

contend they are consecrated not to God but to an evil spirit. (4.13.17; 1271).

Clearly, Calvinism had no room for the monastic life.

So what was left? After the Genevan Reformer had taken away so much of medieval religion – rites, ceremonies, holy days, and holy people – what was left? How was Calvin’s kind of Christian supposed to live? Of course, there were still some specifically religious exercises that Calvin enjoined upon the faithful – Church attendance, prayer, receiving communion, Scripture reading. But that was far simpler than that of the medieval Christian, and it left a lot of time still unaccounted for. So what was the Christian supposed to do? Calvin answered this question in rather unspectacular terms but perhaps with revolutionary consequences. For in denouncing the religiosity of his forebears, Calvin pointed contemporary Christians to their ordinary lives as the proper arena for serving God. Calvin wrote: “The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling....he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life....Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” (3.10.6; 724).

By divine providence, Christians were what God had made them – whether farmers or housewives, merchants or lawyers, or even clergymen. With respect to every such calling, there were duties and responsibilities. So Calvin taught Christians to carry them out in service to God and their fellow man. In this way, Calvin sanctified temporal life, for instead of having to carry out so many specifically religious duties, Protestants could consider their regular jobs as religious enterprises, similar perhaps to the ways that the medieval religious used to look upon their monastic vocations. The long term impact of this new valuation of the ordinary was to channel into secular callings all that had previously gone into monasticism, the cult of the saints, the cult of the dead and the plethora of medieval religious activities otherwise disconnected from daily

life. Ultimately, this would transform the economic and social conditions in which human beings lived.

Early in the twentieth century, a German sociologist by the name of Max Weber (1864-1920) sought to spell out more precisely the relationship between Calvinism and modern capitalism. Going beyond what I have just argued about a new appreciation for the ordinary, Weber contended that a certain kind of Christian activism arose from an inner anxiety inherent within Calvin's doctrine of predestination to be sure of one's election as a child of God. The only way to obtain some assurance was by rigorously carrying out one's Christian duties, including those of one's vocation, and by avoiding overindulgence in the good things of life. Unplanned by Calvin, the result of this "Protestant ethic" was business success and the accumulation of capital, because work that led to prosperity was a sign of God's favor. In other words, Calvinism created a religious ethic that was just what modern capitalism needed. In the words of one historian, "The drive to demonstrate election by ceaseless activity and self-scrutiny became the dynamic that impelled the unceasing competition and innovation intrinsic to capitalism."

I personally have serious doubts about the Weber Thesis. Modern capitalism was on the way long before modern Calvinism, in Italy especially centuries prior to the Reformation. Furthermore, sixteenth century Calvinists were not particularly anxious about their predestination; and Calvin never taught that prosperity per se was a sign of God's favor. After all, Calvin himself experienced great hardships as did many of his followers. God evidenced predestination by the movements of His Spirit in a believer's heart whether rich or poor.

Nevertheless, it is true that Protestantism, especially Calvinism, did inculcate an ethic that was more congenial to capitalism than late medievalism had been. After all, Protestants rejected the cult of St. Francis and his devotion to poverty and begging (which in turn can be understood as a rejection of early modern capitalism). So, by minimizing

the uniquely religious works of the Medieval Church and instead emphasizing the sanctity of temporal callings, Calvin and his co-religionists did facilitate a modern attitude toward work, time, and prosperity.

Of course, there is a great deal more to say about the contents of Calvin's *Institutes*, but in order not to go beyond our allotted time, permit me to discuss just one more topic and that directly related to the theme, "Religious Revolutions," viz., Calvin's political theology. As a matter of fact, in the very first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin was careful to include a final section on government. This, in turn, was a good indication of the other purpose for which Calvin originally wrote the *Institutes*, viz., as a response to allegations that Protestantism was subversive of the established orders of society and state. For Calvin first conceived the *Institutes* as more than a manual of instruction in the essentials of Christian doctrine; he also prepared it as a defense of Protestants whom the French government was maligning and persecuting. Calvin pointed out in a letter to the king of France, Francis I, with which the *Institutes* begins, that his original purpose had been "solely to transmit certain rudiments" of the Christian faith; but that changed when he saw the "fury of certain wicked persons" directed against Christian teaching and those who held it. Therefore, Calvin decided that his book should function as an answer to those who were charging his coreligionists not just with false doctrine but with subverting the state and fostering sedition. Not so, argued Calvin, Christians make good subjects of the king!²¹

Significantly, this letter to the king remained a part of every subsequent edition of the *Institutes*, including the French; and in the last Latin edition of 1559, Calvin still devoted his final chapter to civil government and presented a text that is simply an expanded version of what he had

²¹ Calvin, *1536 Institutes*, 1, 13. See also his "Preface to Psalms," 27, and Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 24-27.

originally written in 1536.²² Accordingly, the last edition as well as the first identified the defense of Protestants from a charge of sedition as one of the author's principal purposes.

But what is so interesting about this feature of the *Institutes* is that even during Calvin's lifetime and certainly in the century following, Protestants of the Calvinist type did engage in active resistance and rebellion against legitimate but Catholic rulers: in Scotland against Mary Queen of Scots, in the Netherlands against Philip II, in France against Catherine de Medici and her sons, in the Holy Roman Empire against the Habsburgs during the Thirty Years War, and even in England against the Anglican (and *not* Catholic) Charles I. Is it simply accidental that all these "good" Reformed Protestants took up arms against lawful rulers? And to be even more specific, should we look at the 1611 edition of the *Institutes* that is a part of our exhibit as preparing the way for the English Civil War a generation later?

Of course, that's a little too simple, and in each of the above conflicts there were lots of issues besides religion and not all of the rebels were Calvinists by any means; but nonetheless it is definitely worth asking whether Calvin's insistence in the *Institutes* that Christians were obedient to their rulers, even bad ones, included loopholes through which Protestants could justify *disobedience*. Somewhat surprisingly for a work designed to deny an accusation of sedition, the *Institutes* not only permits but *insists* upon resistance to tyrants. The only question is who should lead it?

On the one hand, it is certainly true that Calvin required Christians to obey legally constituted authority. Like Luther before him, Calvin taught that God has established government. Forms and laws may

²² For a brief comparison of the two editions on civil government, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 2:191-94.

vary from place to place, but what legitimates them all is the ordinance of God. Calvin wrote:

Divine providence has wisely arranged that various countries should be ruled by various kinds of government. For as elements cohere only in unequal proportion, so countries are best held together according to their own particular inequality. However, all these things are needlessly spoken to those for whom the will of the Lord is enough. For if it has seemed good to him to set kings over kingdoms, senates or municipal officers over free cities, it is our duty to show ourselves compliant and obedient to whomever he sets over the places where we live. (4.20.8; 1494-95)

For Calvin, God's establishment and human obedience are complementary concepts. The first requires the second; and just as the obligation to obedience does not vary with the *form* of government, so also it does not depend upon the character of the ruler. Calvin was clear that Christians should obey even bad rulers. First of all, Calvin specified the nature of obedience:

With hearts inclined to reverence their rulers, the subjects should prove their obedience toward them, whether by obeying their proclamations, or by paying taxes, or by undertaking public offices and burdens which pertain to the common defense, or by executing any other commands of theirs. (4.20.23; 1510)

But what if the wicked hold the highest political offices? Calvin described a variety of such rulers:

Some princes are careless about all those things to which they ought to have given heed, and, far from all care, lazily take their pleasure. Others, intent upon their own business, put up for sale laws, privileges, judgments, and letters of favor. Others drain the common people of their money, and afterward lavish it on insane largesse. Still others exercise sheer robbery, plundering houses, raping virgins and matrons, and slaughtering the innocent. (4.20.24; 1512).

Calvin knew that corruption came in many forms – from the venial to the tyrannical. Nevertheless, Calvin wrote, “whoever they may be, they have their authority solely from God.” For Calvin, God was in charge, not people; so that Christians should understand that when the wicked exercised political power, they did so by the God's permission; and, in fact,

God was using them “to punish the wickedness of the people.” Bad government was a way in which God restrained and corrected disobedience to Himself and His own laws. (4.20.25; 1512)

Of course, Calvin did not believe that subjects should become complicit in the wickedness of their ruler. Burdensome taxes, unfair policies, foolish conflicts – these they would have to endure. But if government should demand an obedience that was also disobedience to God and so put eternity at risk, well, then, Calvin (following St. Peter) taught, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). But even here – like Daniel in the lions’ den – disobedience to the state meant suffering the consequences and not overthrowing the ruler. That was the business of God, not individual Christians. (4.20.32; 1520-21).²³

In this way, by insisting on the obligation of obedience even to wicked rulers, Calvin was clearly answering the accusations of opponents that Protestants were inherently rebels against the state. Quite the contrary, Calvin was saying, Protestants are good and faithful subjects; and even when in rare cases for reasons of conscience they have to disobey, they do so passively and suffer their fate.

But this was not the only thing that Calvin said about dealing with bad rulers, for in the last few pages of the *Institutes*, he introduced a significant exception to the obligation of obedience – an exception that could in almost every instance justify the Protestant rebellions against Catholic rulers in the early modern period. For in every case the rebels were led by “lesser magistrates,” i.e., people to whom – from Calvin’s perspective – God had also entrusted political power beneath that of the monarch for certain but in the exercise of which they were responsible not just to the king but also to God.

²³ Calvin wrote, “For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord’s to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer.” 4.20.31 (1518).

Regarding obedience and/or in the worst cases purely passive resistance, Calvin wrote, “I am speaking all the while of *private* individuals” [emphasis mine]. But then he added,

For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings..., I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God’s ordinance. (4.20.31; 1519)

Let me read that last part again, “They dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God’s ordinance.” So instead of obedience, Calvin charged these “lesser magistrates” with the duty of resisting tyrants – and not just those who tyrannized Protestants on account of religion but also those who exploited their people instead of serving them. God established such lesser officers precisely for the protection of ordinary people even when that meant resisting the king.

As examples of what he had in mind, Calvin listed three such offices from antiquity – Spartan ephors, Roman tribunes, and Athenian demarchs – but then he added an example from his own times, “and perhaps, as things now are, such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies.” With these words Calvin was pointing to institutions like the Estates-General in France, the Imperial Diet in Germany, and Parliament in England. But this means that Charles I’s parliamentary opponents could easily find justification for defying their king in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian* religion. Under the right circumstances, therefore, political upheavals could also be Protestant rebellions.

Now it would be grand to say more about Calvin’s work – at least, I’d enjoy it! – but our time is running out if we want to leave room for questions and comments. So let me conclude simply by thanking the

university and the Remnant Trust for making Calvin's *Institutes* a part of the exhibit, for here we have a major work that both summarized and propagated the Protestant revolution of the 16th century. Calvin's version of Christianity became the religion of many and his fundamental ideas leavened the thinking of those who followed. In his own times, he was a controversial figure. Perhaps that is still true, although many today may just want to write him off as irrelevant. In other words, the Genevan Reformer may not have been a man for all times; but he was certainly a man for his times; and those times continue to exert a powerful influence on our own. So if we want to understand our world, we need to know at least a little bit about John Calvin.