

NAE RELIGIONIS INSTI-
tutio, totam ferè pietatis summã, & quic-
quid est in doctrinã, & in his cognitu ne-
cessarium, cõmentariis omnibus pie-
tatis f

An Explorer's Guide to



JOHN CALVIN

YUDHA THIAN TO



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Why John Calvin?

A Tour Guide to Calvin

In this book, you will learn about my good friend John Calvin. I want you to get to know him because he has been a dear friend to me for so many years. Even though he lived about five centuries ago, I still hear his voice today. He is a person I go to when I need guidance in understanding the Bible, thinking about certain Christian teachings, getting ready to lead a worship service, teaching a Sunday school class, or thinking about life in general. I have listened to (or read, to be precise) many of his sermons, sung many psalms in the tunes that were first composed during his lifetime in Geneva, and prayed the prayers that he wrote. He has been my guide because he left behind a wealth of written work that is still valuable for us to learn from. Because he is a good friend of mine, I wanted to write a book about him so it can be a guide for you as you take a step into learning about him and his impact on Christianity since the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

When you look at the number of books that Calvin wrote, including a shelf full of commentaries on the Bible, you may think it a daunting task to get to know him and his thoughts. Thankfully, we can gain insight into John Calvin by focusing on the final edition of his most famous work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he



Figure 1.1. A portrait of John Calvin

published in 1559. This work is massive. Even though it is one single publication, it is divided into four books with a total of eighty chapters. “How would I even start?” you might ask. I write this book as a response to your question. Imagine that I am serving you as your guide as you try to chart the landscape of Calvin’s life and theology. You may compare the journey of understanding Calvin and his significance in the church as

a trip to a vacation destination you have never visited before. In such a case, you need a tour guide.

The island of Bali, one of Indonesia’s more than seventeen thousand islands, is famous for its beauty. It is one of the most-visited tourist destinations in the country. As a tropical island it offers scenery that can be breathtaking. The beaches are warm and inviting. If you love surfing, you will find places where you almost hear the waves call your name. If you love to see mountains and rice paddies rolling down their slopes, your eyes will delight in the greens of these fields. On the island there are volcanoes, some of which are still active, running right down its center. To the north, south, east, and west, you will find beaches and places to dive, do some snorkeling, or enjoy a boat ride. The music and dance performances will bring you to a whole different world when you visit the island.

But if it is your first time in Bali, you may find it hard to navigate. First, as is the traffic rule for the whole country of Indonesia, people drive on the left side of the street. You may be terrified when you drive on the island for the first time; all the other vehicles are

coming toward you! Next, you may find it hard to pick where to start. Do you want to visit Kuta, the most famous beach on the island, first, and then go to Ubud, the mountain resort well known for its beauty, or should you reverse the order? Do you want to visit Besakih, the largest Hindu temple on the island, which has been around since the tenth century AD, on your first day or the last day? You have these questions, and to maximize your visit to the island, you need some guidance. After all, the island is quite large, about 2,300 square miles. A tour guide can help you navigate the area well so that you get the most out of your time there. In the same spirit, let me now be your guide to exploring the life and teaching of Calvin. This book will assist you to know Calvin as a person, a pastor, and a Reformer. It will also guide you to understand his main theological teachings as he explained them in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

I grew up in Indonesia in a church that follows the teaching and practices that Calvin set forth when he was in Geneva in the sixteenth century. I still pause every now and then to ponder how wonderful it is that churches in modern-day Indonesia inherit so much from Calvin, a leader who lived several centuries ago in a land thousands of miles away. This is just a small example of how vast God's kingdom is. As a young boy, I was already familiar with Reformed theology, the teaching of the church that finds its roots in Calvin's teachings. I first encountered his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* when I was in high school. I still remember how the clarity and coherence of his thoughts mesmerized me. But it was not until I studied theology at Calvin Theological Seminary that I engaged myself in a deeper study of Calvin's life and theological thought. When I was doing my doctoral work, I studied under the guidance of Professor Richard Muller, who is well known for his academic works on Calvin, the Reformation, and the thoughts of numerous authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

When I was a graduate student at Calvin Seminary, I had the opportunity to work as a student assistant at the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies. The center is the largest in the world of its kind. It holds a collection of books and other material on John Calvin, Calvinism, the Reformation, and early modern studies. The center is jointly supported by Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University. As I worked at the center, I learned deeply about Calvin and his work. I also had numerous interactions with scholars, ministers, teachers, and students from all over the world. They came to the center to study and do research, and I still cherish my relationships with many of these people today.

FUN FACT

The H. Henry Meeter Center of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a wonderful center for the study of Calvin and Calvinism. It holds about four hundred rare books published in the sixteenth century, including various editions of Calvin's *Institutes*, many of Calvin's other writings, books by other authors, and Bibles in various languages; about twenty-two thousand articles on Calvin, Calvinism, and the Reformation; several thousand microfilms and microfiches of early modern books and other material; and about 5,500 books on the same subjects.

When I completed this book, I was in my twentieth year of teaching theology at Trinity Christian College. In seventeen of those twenty years, I regularly taught a course on Calvin and his theology. At the beginning of each semester when I teach this course, I always ask my students—mostly juniors and seniors in college—whether there is a doctrine or a term that they (or other people they know) most associate with Calvin. The first doctrine

that my students often mention is the doctrine of predestination. I'm not surprised; most Christians I know respond similarly. To many people, the name Calvin is almost synonymous with the doctrine of predestination. Many people think that he was the originator of this doctrine. Others believe that he invented the acronym TULIP. As we'll see, both of these ideas are mistaken.

What, then, are Calvin's most significant contributions as a theologian, and why should we continue to read his work today? Two reasons stand out to me: first, Calvin is a champion of biblical theology. And second, Calvin has made a lasting impact on the global church through his theological thought and his leadership.

Calvin as a Biblical Theologian

The term "biblical theology" means different things to different people. When I apply this term to my explanation of Calvin's significance, I mean that he is a thinker who builds all his theological thoughts firmly on the Bible. All of Calvin's doctrinal teachings start from his deep reading and study of the Bible. Beyond *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and other theological writings, Calvin left us with volumes upon volumes of Bible commentaries. In these commentaries he meticulously goes through each book verse by verse, explaining the meaning of each verse and passage carefully. Often the way he reads and interprets the Bible surprises me.

Calvin firmly believes that the Bible is the Word of God. He states that God has revealed himself first through his great work of creation and more specifically through his words in Scripture. He often uses the metaphor of spectacles to show that Scripture helps us to know God, just as a pair of spectacles helps a person with a vision problem to see or read better.¹ God gives us Scripture, Calvin believes, to show us the way into salvation and to give us the

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.6.1.

privilege to know him intimately. Calvin states that Scripture holds the highest authority over our lives because the Holy Spirit has inspired the human authors to write God's words. Therefore, the authority of Scripture comes directly from God. The Holy Spirit also works in the hearts of people so that they can believe the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit inwardly seals God's Word in their hearts as it takes full charge of the whole person.² Here is where we see Calvin's emphasis on the internal or inward testimony of the Holy Spirit regarding Scripture.

Calvin insists that when we read and understand the Bible, we must seek the plain sense or plain reading of Scripture. As much as possible, he wants people to understand the words of Scripture as they are written. He emphasizes this to avoid excessive allegorizing of Scripture's meaning, which many medieval authors tended to do. For this reason, Calvin worked very hard to write Bible commentaries based on his readings of the original languages of the Bible, namely Hebrew and Greek. He did this because, in his time and before, the church had a different way of interpreting the Bible.

Medieval exegesis and Calvin's approach. Beginning from the medieval era, the church employed a four-layer method of interpreting Scripture. This method or approach is often called four-fold exegesis. The medieval scholars believed that Scripture must be interpreted following its literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses or meanings. The literal sense (or meaning) follows the exact meaning of the words as written in the Bible. The allegorical sense refers to the meaning that is hidden beneath the written words, namely a spiritual meaning not clearly seen in the text. The tropological sense brings people to understand the moral message of the written words. Last, the anagogical sense has to do with what is still coming in the future, namely a look into the end

²Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.5.

of time and the second coming of Jesus. In theology we call the teaching of the second coming of Christ *eschatology*. Thus, the analogical interpretation of Scripture carries with it the eschatological beliefs that the church holds. Taken together, the four layers of meanings in the medieval interpretation of Scripture gave people the literal and spiritual messages of the Bible, offering not only guidance to people on how they must live here on earth but also future hope of the resurrection and the second coming of Christ.

Calvin's insistence that we only read the Bible based on the literal and historical meanings of the text is born of his disagreement with the way the medieval church expanded its interpretation of the Bible into something not fully in line with what the Bible says. But this does not mean that Calvin rejects the allegorical, tropological, and analogical senses altogether. In fact, he allows and even uses allegorical interpretation, whenever it is necessary, as long as it is simple, useful for instruction, and consistent with the Old and New Testaments. On this last point, Calvin emphasizes that Scripture should interpret Scripture. In other words, one should find the meaning of a particular biblical passage based on what other parts of the Bible say about it. Most important, one must find the meaning of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

Calvin's theological works are expressions of what he thinks the Bible means. When you read the *Institutes*, you will find that Calvin bases all his statements and explanations on what he thinks the Bible says regarding that very topic. He intended the *Institutes* to be read alongside his Bible commentaries. In the *Institutes* he often engages in debates with his opponents as he explains his theological views based on his understanding of Scripture. You can see how the *Institutes* is polemical. In his Bible commentaries, however, Calvin avoids such polemics because there, he wants people to understand the true meaning of Scripture. Therefore, it is often necessary

for modern readers to read Calvin's *Institutes* together with his Bible commentaries.

When my students read the *Institutes* for the first time, they are often surprised to discover how biblical the book is, because many of them thought it was just a dense theological book without much grounding in the Bible. In other words, my students find that Calvin does not depart from the Bible when he makes his doctrinal statements. Of course, these doctrinal statements are based on his interpretation of the Bible. But in interpreting the Bible, he is also careful to explain what it teaches. I also find that Calvin is consistent in his interpretation, and that his interpretation is grounded on his firm conviction that he is trying to explain the very Word of God to the people. Calvin's whole theological system, therefore, is a system of biblical teaching that he develops systematically. At its core, Calvin's theology is his careful explication of the Bible written as a detailed elaboration of topics; together these form a strong foundation for what the church should believe. A theological methodology such as this is still important today. When we try to understand a certain theological or doctrinal belief, we need to start with a careful reading of the Bible, and then analyze and evaluate the views of theologians or scholars who discuss that topic so we can formulate what we believe and hold for ourselves.

Calvin's Institutes among theological treatises of other Reformers. As a theological work, the *Institutes* was not unique. Other Reformers before Calvin had already published works in a similar vein. Philip Melancthon, for instance, published his famous *Loci Communes*, or *Commonplaces*, in 1521. He provided explanations of Christian doctrines within each appropriate locus or place, and he expanded the doctrinal teaching of the Lutheran branch of the Reformation. Another example is Ulrich Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion*, published in 1525. Zwingli compared and contrasted the teachings of the Church of Rome and

that of the Protestants, with a goal to show that Rome was in the wrong and the Protestants were in the right. You can sense the polemics even in the title of this work.

Calvin intended the *Institutes* as a teaching tool for pastors and theologians, as well as for people who were preparing themselves to become church leaders. He wrote most editions of the book in Latin, the language of the learned. He wanted his readers to be well educated in the church's doctrines. Because the *Institutes* is grounded in the Bible, Calvin intended for the *Institutes* to lead readers to consult his Bible commentaries.

In the *Institutes* Calvin integrates his study of the classical philosophers, such as Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle, and early Christian authors, including Athanasius, Chrysostom, the Cappadocian Fathers, and most notably Augustine, into his own thoughts. He also closely interacts with many medieval theologians, with Anselm and Aquinas occupying important spots in some of his discussions. Throughout the *Institutes* he often refers to Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*, either as a point of reference or to express his disagreement with this famous medieval theologian. And true to the polemical nature of the work, Calvin rarely holds back from revealing the mistakes he perceived in the Church of Rome. He believed that the Roman Catholic Church had departed from the true teaching of the Bible and had exchanged it with superstition. His critiques of Rome cover a wide range of doctrinal and ecclesial practices, spanning from the church's doctrine of transubstantiation, the power of the Papacy, the five sacraments that Protestants do not affirm, the church's beliefs in sainthood, pilgrimage to holy places, and relics to the issues that Luther and earlier Reformers had attacked, such as the selling of indulgences, purgatory, and justification through good works.

Taken as a whole, the *Institutes* was Calvin's way of presenting a well-rounded theological teaching, grounded in the Bible, for the

edification of the church leaders who, in turn, would educate the whole church. In it, Calvin interacts with vast numbers of authors and thinkers from classical philosophy to the Christian thinkers who lived up to his time. As we will see, the education that he received, informed by the spirit of humanism that shaped the era leading up to his lifetime, paved the way for him to write this book. Humanism's central theme of going back to the sources (in Latin, *ad fontes*) became the foundation of his study of ancient writers as well as the original languages of the Bible, Greek and Hebrew. It was also the common thread that bound him together with other Reformers of his time. In this way, Calvin engaged with the long-standing Christian tradition from the earliest history of Christianity to his time. Thus, while Calvin's theology is deeply rooted in Scripture, he did not read the Bible without consulting the writings and opinions of others. His interaction with Christian authors of all ages was a way to show the true meaning of confessing that Christians are part of one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. As he wrote the *Institutes*, he sought to stand in the company of believers of all ages in every place.

Calvin's Lasting Impact in the Global Church

As a sixteenth-century Reformer, Calvin brought significant changes to the church that he led in Geneva. Yet the changes and renewals he implemented in his time did not affect only that city or last only during his lifetime. They went far beyond the geographical boundaries of one city, or one country, or even one continent. Calvin's thoughts and church practices have impacted Christianity all over the world for almost five centuries.

Calvin was a second-generation Reformer. When you think about the Reformation of the sixteenth century, you might think right away of Martin Luther. And that's understandable. Luther initiated changes in the church, moving it away from the medieval theology

and practices that he believed to be incorrect and unbiblical. While Luther wanted to change many things about the church, at the center of his disagreement with the church was the issue of justification, or salvation, by grace alone. The medieval church in which Luther grew up taught that we are saved by God's grace in Christ together with our good works. In addition, the church taught that God still required a temporal punishment for sins people had not confessed, sins that had not been pardoned by God through the authority of the church. And even after sins were confessed, the church insisted, God's justice had not been satisfied, and therefore people still needed to receive punishment. They would undergo this punishment in purgatory after they died. Remission of that punishment was made available by the church in the form of an *indulgence*. In practice, the church could issue a letter to a person to demonstrate a certain kind of penance. It later devised a plan that would allow people to bypass their time in purgatory if they purchased a letter that the church issued, called a "letter of indulgence." When people purchased a letter, depending on the sum of money they paid, they could secure complete freedom from purgatory. And even better, they could also purchase letters of indulgence for other people, such as their parents, who had died and were believed to be going through the fire of purgatory. Luther disagreed with the selling of the letter of indulgences because the practice diminished the significance of the death of Christ for our salvation and put at the center of our salvation "good works" in the form of purchasing the letter. Following the teaching of the Bible, Luther emphasized that salvation is only by the grace of God.

In this and other respects, Calvin continued Luther's work. The two didn't agree on every point, but in his teachings Calvin, like Luther before him, consistently argued that we are only saved by God's grace. We can do nothing to earn our own salvation. But Calvin did not stop with making changes in the theological teaching

of the church. He developed an extensive plan to implement the changes. The first step he took was to insist on people's knowledge of the teaching of Scripture. Still in the footsteps of Luther, Calvin wanted people to worship, hear the Bible and sermons, say their prayers, and recite their creed all in their own mother tongue. Luther had started this by translating the Bible into German. Before Luther, Latin was the language of the Western church. You can easily imagine that ordinary people living in Germany who only spoke German would not have had a clue what the priests said at Mass. Before the Reformation, people went to church not to understand the message of the Bible but only to receive the Eucharist, which would later amount to the grace of God, or salvation. While there was beautiful music in the church, the choir sang in Latin, so ordinary people did not actively participate in the singing. They were there only to partake of the Eucharist.

Calvin wanted the people in Geneva to hear sermons in French so that they could understand them well. In addition, he wanted people to sing the psalms, recite the Apostles' Creed, and pray the Lord's Prayer in French. He intended that all these participatory activities at church should be integral parts of worship that would build people's understanding of God, themselves, and their relationship with God. Therefore, in matters concerning worship, Calvin worked hard to ensure that people gained knowledge of God by regularly going to church. He developed an easy way for the church in Geneva to sing the psalms, putting the texts into metrical form in the familiar language. Calvin's insistence on including the congregation in singing at church is one of the lasting influences of Calvin on the church all these years later. Calvin was not the only Reformer who sought to change how the church worshiped, but his emphases upon hearing God's Word and singing the psalms have deeply informed the church to this day.



Figure 1.2. The Reformation Wall in Geneva featuring (from left) William Farel, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and John Knox

The Reformation of the church that took place under Calvin in Geneva was not just about theological doctrine and worship in the church. It was also intended to reform people's lives. To ensure this, Calvin insisted on church discipline, which was upheld by a body called the Consistory, consisting of all the ministers of the church in Geneva and twelve councilors from the different councils of the city. I will discuss the Consistory later in this book. At this point, I just want to underline that as a leader, Calvin wanted to ensure that people became followers of Christ who would know the teaching of the Bible and live accordingly. The Consistory was there to ensure that the people did both. While it is perhaps understandable that Calvin had to take such an approach in maintaining discipline, it is also understandable that people did not like such strict discipline. In subsequent years and even centuries, the Consistory

has received a bad reputation. However, Calvin's insistence on discipline has had a lasting impact on Christians all over the world by showing how Christian faith must be reflected in daily living.

Another important aspect of Calvin's influence concerned the understanding of marriage and the place of children in the church. Before the Reformation, the way people got married was much different than it is today. In medieval Europe, a man and a woman could go together to a tavern, drink in the name of marriage in the presence of witnesses or promise to be married to each other, and right away they would be considered married.³ Then they would engage in a sexual relationship right after the promise of marriage. Of course, this practice led to a variety of problems. First, it would be rather difficult to make a distinction between a promise to be married and social drinking at taverns. One party, either the man or the woman, might easily deny that they intended to be married when they drank together. Most often it was the men who would deny that a marriage took place, but there were cases when the women denied that they had the intention to be married when they drank with the other party. Another problem that often arose was the practice of polygamy. Let's imagine a man whose line of work required him to travel from one town to another. He might get married in one town then repeat the act in another. In those days communication between people living in different towns was not as easy as it is today. Therefore, people—most likely men—could potentially be married multiple times in different places. To prevent this from happening, the church in Geneva developed a new practice. The church order of 1541 contained a regulation that couples should be married at church, that the ceremony should take place on a day when there was a church service, and that

³For further discussion on this issue, see, for instance, John Witt Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva*, vol. 1, *Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

the couple's intention to marry should be announced prior to the intended day of their wedding. This practice, called the marriage banns, became standard. Interestingly, if you go to Indonesia today, you will still find similar practices in many of the churches of various theological persuasions, including Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and many others.

Children were an important feature of Calvin's ministry and theology. He believed that children should receive instruction in the faith while still young. One good way of teaching children is through singing. The church order published in Geneva in 1541, which provided guidance on how the church should operate there, states that the little children should be taught how to sing the psalms. Even though Calvin's name is not written as the author of the church order, I believe Calvin was primarily behind its publication. The church order implies that by teaching young children to sing the psalms, the church could be sure that when the children grow up, they will carry with them the knowledge of God and his words. When the church teaches children to sing, these children will go home and sing the psalms there. As they do, their parents will hear the psalms in French, and they will learn too. What a marvelous idea! Calvin was empowering the children to teach their parents.

The parents of these children were born and raised in the medieval church, where they did not participate in worship, did not receive enough teaching of the Bible, were not accustomed to hearing sermons in their own language, and did not recite the creed and pray in their mother tongue. It was hard for these parents and adults to undergo change as they joined the Reformed church even before Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536. These adults needed more time to adjust themselves and to embrace the newness that the Reformation brought. But the children were different. Many of them were born after the Reformation. Therefore, they started their

Christian lives already in the context of the new church. In Geneva, the children in the Latin school received instruction on psalm singing from a precentor every day. The children in turn led the congregational singing at worship services, under the guidance of the precentor. By empowering the children to sing and to bring the message of the psalms home, Calvin effectively helped the adults transition into the new church.

Still fixing his eyes on the young children, Calvin thought very hard about giving them further instruction in the faith. To that end, he wrote and published several catechisms during his lifetime. Catechisms did not originate with Calvin. Long before the Reformation, the early and medieval churches had used catechisms or catechetical materials. Before Calvin's time, Luther had already published his *Small Catechism* in 1529 as a way to help parents teach the rudiments of the Christian faith to their children at home. Calvin took another step by using the catechism as a link between baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two sacraments of the Protestant churches. As was the common church practice in the day among both the majority of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin's church in Geneva baptized infants. As these baptized children grew, they needed instruction to help them understand the teaching of the Bible. These youngsters were not allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper before they made their profession of faith when they were old enough to understand. These children had to go through catechism classes that the church held every Sunday at noon. The catechism books that Calvin published were the material used to instruct the young people. I'm sure some of my readers will have also been through catechism classes at church. And even if you did not have that experience, I hope you will agree with me that faith formation of children is important and that the church must take an active role in educating the young. This is another one of Calvin's lasting influences in the church.

People often think of Calvin as a dour, stern, and cold theologian who only thought about doctrines. However, I find him to be a warm pastor who cared deeply about God's people and whose influence on his own tradition and the global church is undeniable. I hope in the next chapters you will meet a man who loved God deeply and who did all that he could to ensure that people would get to know God intimately, worship him with all their hearts, and live as Christians who glorify God all the days of their lives.

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