

Remembering a Man and His Book

INTRODUCTION

In the 1559 letter to the reader that accompanied his last Latin edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin permitted himself a degree of satisfaction:

For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to that end he ought to relate its contents.¹

Calvin had labored for more than twenty years to find that “order,” an explanation of Christian doctrine that not only instructed readers in the faith but also moved their hearts and minds to accept the truth of the Gospel. Through those years of writing, revision, and additions, Calvin created one of the great books of his age.

Posterity for Calvin and his book has been complicated in light of their curious, often strained relationship with the past four hundred and fifty years. Unflattering caricatures of the reformer endure in our day,

often with little reference to the *Institutes*, which is assumed to express Calvin's repugnant vision of a tyrannical God. From the sixteenth century onward, numerous detractors have asserted that Calvin's book is covered with the ashes of Michael Servetus, the Spanish heretic executed in Geneva in autumn 1553 following a trial in which Calvin played a central role.² Servetus stalks the story of Calvin's *Institutes* to this day.

Equally, among those today who praise the Frenchman, even to the extent of calling themselves "Calvinists" or "New Calvinists," familiarity with the contents of the *Institutes* is patchy, often mediated through figures such as Jonathan Edwards or leading modern church and scholarly interpreters such as John Piper, Richard Muller, and Mark Dever (all three very different). Calvin and his *Institutes* have been regarded as one and the same, in a symbiotic relationship, with the book, whether read or not, the manifestation of the man.

Yet such assumptions rest uneasily on the foundations of history. Calvin was no one-book wonder, and he never saw himself as having a singular relationship to the *Institutes* despite the years devoted to the work. The *Institutes* belonged to a larger body of writing that included Calvin's voluminous biblical commentaries, where, it could be argued, his heart truly lay. The *Institutes* and commentaries were to be read side by side. Both provided interpretation of God's Word, but in different yet complementary ways. The commentaries followed the grain of the biblical text and

explained the meaning of the words, while the *Institutes* offered instruction in doctrine found in scripture. Calvin's letter to the reader reminds us of his compelling desire to interpret the Word of God. He did have an intimate relationship with one book, but that book was the Bible.

Nevertheless, Calvin was immensely proud of the content of the *Institutes* and believed that its powerful arguments should determine his persona as a doctor of the church.³ He saw his work as a sum of doctrine for the Reformed churches across Europe, which he reached in both Latin and vernacular translations in increasing numbers. The *Institutes* grew over the years on account of Calvin's reading and preaching, as the result of theological controversies and exigencies, and through the influence of colleagues and friends, notably Martin Bucer and Philip Melancthon. Study and debate spurred Calvin in his search for a book that articulated the proper order of doctrine whereby the church would rightly teach scripture.

The backwash of the Servetus execution in 1553, combined with the hostility of Lutherans, ensured Calvin and the *Institutes* a troubled legacy. To name "Calvin" and "*Institutes*" in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries was to voice assumptions and prejudices that often had little to do with either the historical figure or the content of his book. On the one hand, the book could mean the authentic Reformed tradition, as it did for Charles Hodge in Princeton of the nineteenth century or does for John Piper today. On

the other, it could refer to a problematic bundle of doctrine and moral attitudes, such as we find in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about Calvinism in eighteenth-century Rhode Island, *The Minister's Wooing*.

At times the pious devotion accorded the work proved insufficient. The *Institutes* was summoned to fight the battles of a new age. Reform-minded persons believed Calvin's book to express something contemporary writings could not match. In disruptive moments of controversy, Calvin's words in the *Institutes* burst through the mere symbolic qualities of the text. We will encounter, for example, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the 1920s and 1930s and Allan Boesak in the 1980s, crucial figures who lived in times of crises when what Calvin said shaped theological debates. Suddenly, how one reclaimed the Reformation and read Calvin was of the utmost importance. In America, Calvin's influence was found in the religious disputes of the Civil War and the visceral debates between Mercersburg and Princeton Theological Seminary. The Frenchman was given voice for the twentieth century by the "lion of Princeton," Benjamin B. Warfield, and his close friend Abraham Kuyper.

The *Institutes* has been employed to justify and raze hierarchies of power. Like its author, the *Institutes* was forged in controversy and did not want for polemic. Its pages tell the stories of Calvin's arguments with Lutherans, Anabaptists, Catholics, and the ever-present Servetus after 1553. It pulses with life, a mixture of elegant prose and pugnaciousness. Calvin's work is not a

book for complacent, bourgeois churches, tepid Christians, or indifferent secularists. Today it nurtures growing house churches struggling in China and rapidly expanding Reformed communities in Brazil. Regardless of whether its reader professes a faith, the *Institutes* challenges and encourages, informs and outrages; like tempered steel, it thrusts its message of redemption and reprobation into the soul. It demands change; it demands that its reader be changed.

Calvin's tale subverts summary, for each age found different ways of reading or ignoring the Genevan reformer. The pursuer of the *Institutes*' biography stumbles over numerous rabbit holes, some deeper than others. Many prominent meetings or persons, such as the Synod of Dort (1617) or, later, Jonathan Edwards, make little or sparing mention of the Frenchman, leading us toward one set of conclusions. Then, suddenly, we learn that at the Westminster Assembly (1643–53) Calvin was among the figures most frequently cited, and that he was amply cited in the eighteenth century by the first black African to be ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church. Bean counting of references is evidently of limited value as we seek to measure the *Institutes*' influence.

In the following I have attempted to hold to certain principles. First, I consider, if briefly, references to the *Institutes* within the broader context of the author's thought. Further, I bear in mind that in the centuries after his death, from the Netherlands to Milton's England and Jonathan Edwards's America, the *Institutes*

belonged to the tradition of Reformed theology and sat in the library of any educated Protestant cleric. Calvin was part of a tradition, and neither in his day nor in the ensuing centuries until the nineteenth century was he treated as a solitary voice. Calvin and the *Institutes* belonged to a wider, protean body of literature that evolved with the passing decades.

Mixed Identities

Distinctions make for a good start. Historians, theologians, and others who should know better frequently believe that equating John Calvin with “Calvinism,” the diverse movement that carries his name, is sufficient proof of the Genevan reformer’s enormous influence on Western, and now Eastern, culture. This casual assumption that the historical person and a diverse movement are pretty much interchangeable falters when, for example, we consider South Africa. The opponents of apartheid held that Calvin should be separated from what was sanctioned as “Calvinism,” which was appropriated as a racist creed. Collapsing the sixteenth-century reformer into the myriad movements that claimed his name, if little else, is common enough. However, as a reading of history, this interpretation both grossly overinflates and distorts a legacy.

Yet we persist in our pursuit of Calvin, for what’s a movement without a face? Innumerable books and articles attempt to attract readers by putting Calvin in

their titles only to discard the reformer in the text for some amorphous “Calvinism” with which he might be loosely associated. Urban myths abound. Didn’t Max Weber and R. H. Tawney demonstrate that Calvin was in favor of capitalism? Wasn’t Geneva the source of modern American democracy? Isn’t Calvin the patron saint of Puritan moralism and sexual repression? It would be convenient for many historians and journalists if these platitudes were accurate, but the truth is no, no, and no.

The conflation of Calvin and Calvinism serves the purposes of supporters and detractors. The Genevan reformer has often been abducted by individuals and groups seeking to use his name for positions he could never have held, such as modern ideas of biblical inerrancy. This literary and doctrinal kidnapping took place while Calvin lived and continued unabated after his death, forcing us to ask, who was this man and what was the relationship between him and his successors?

Our obsession with great figures, usually great men, seriously distorts our understanding of the Reformation by suggesting that Calvin and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* dominated the age and that they pushed other reformers and their works into the shade. That view says more about us than about the sixteenth century, when Calvin lived and worked as part of a network of scholars and churchmen whose influence on him was decisive. Without Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli, there would have been no John Calvin as we know him; without the partnership

of his near contemporary Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, Calvin might well have been thrown out of Geneva a second time.

Such contextual considerations should not lead us to undersell a great book. The beauty and vision of the *Institutes* are truly amazing, and so too is Calvin's ability to speak down the ages from his Genevan pulpits to, for example, nineteenth-century Princeton, and now to the social media world of New Calvinism. To understand Calvin's *Institutes* as a "great book," we need to understand the remarkable way in which it captured the spirit of its age, continued to be read by succeeding generations, and then emerged as a defining text of a theological ecclesiastical tradition.

Origins

What sort of person was the author of the *Institutes*?⁴ Historical myths offer us several options: a defender of the faith and great interpreter of the Bible, an advocate of theocracy in Reformation Geneva, or a murderer of an innocent, if deluded, doubter (Servetus). Calvin appears as the founder of democratic government and the epitome of intolerance, depending on one's perspective. Such attributions are deeply complicated. In many Reformed churches today, the Frenchman is spoken of with great affection, even reverence, but the theology with which he is associated owes more to writers of the seventeenth century, more to the Synod

of Dort than to the pulpits of Geneva. Calvin never saw a tulip in his life. Liberal churches, in turn, often name Calvin as a “heritage” figure and perhaps use the occasional anodyne or unthreatening quotation from his works on Reformation Sunday, but ignore anything of substance.

Outside churches of the Reformed tradition, the only acceptable “Calvin” in contemporary parlance is linked to money, patriotism, and a modern ethic of overwork. Apart from providing a vaguely religious basis for capitalism, however, Calvin is a metaphor for everything people dislike about Christianity, in particular its supposed intolerance and moralism.

If Doctor Frankenstein were to create a Calvinist monster out of the enduring clichés, what would emerge from the laboratory? Probably a self-righteous, wealthy workaholic, who thinks everything is to be exploited for profit, and, driven by guilt, feels himself superior to others but cannot decide whether God loves or hates him. If required to make a decision about things divine or human, he would create a committee from which he would split. And it goes without saying that the monster would be humorless company.

In a 1983 article for *Vanity Fair* titled “The Last Donahue Show,” Catholic writer Walker Percy ridiculed daytime television, its obsession with sex, and what such luridness says about a society addicted to the salacious.⁵ In Percy’s parody, toward the end of the show John Calvin appears from the green room with a Confederate general and third guest, who Donahue

thinks is Harry Truman. Calvin is first identified as Moses and then as “reverend” until he says his name. Just before a bemused Donahue interviews the reformer, the program cuts to commercials for shampoo and dog food. Percy writes:

But when the show returns, John Calvin, who does not understand commercial breaks, has jumped the gun and is mid sentence.

Calvin (speaking in a thick French accent not unlike Charles Boyer’s):—of his redemptive sacrifice? What I have heard is licentious talk about deeds which are an abomination before God, meriting eternal damnation unless they repent and throw themselves on God’s mercy. Which they are predestined to do or not to do, so why bother to discuss it?

Donahue (gravely): That’s pretty heavy, Reverend.

Calvin: Heavy? Yes, it’s heavy.

Donahue challenges the reformer, saying everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, and asks what is wrong with “two consenting adults expressing their sexual preference in the bedroom or, ah, under a bush.” An uncomprehending Calvin responds, “sexual preference?” and turns, puzzled, to his fellow guests and shrugs.

In many respects, the *Institutes* and its author remain as foreign to modern society as to Percy’s bemused TV host. Yet it is that very otherness, those powerful convictions and refusal to compromise, that continue to draw new readers.

The genuine excitement of many young people on reading Calvin contrasts sharply with mainstream traditions, ecclesiastical and secular, that have thoroughly domesticated his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* into yet another book on the shelf. Such banality strips the *Institutes* of its truly revolutionary message, that nothing in human existence, absolutely nothing, possesses a shred of authority or legitimacy apart from the will of God. The *Institutes* was not conceived to legitimate power structures. Calvin wrote to Francis I in 1536 to stop persecution, and he fought with the Genevan magistrates until his last breath, just as Nathan excoriated David the king. Calvin's enemies had little difficulty identifying the implications of his writing, and the *Institutes* was even publicly burned in Switzerland, by his Protestants opponents.

The *Institutes* is a thoroughly subversive work in need of liberation from the pallid articles and monographs that in their pedantry lose sight of the book's breadth. Calvin understood exactly what he had written, and until his last days he hesitated to utter the conclusion he knew he had led others to draw: the ungodly and unrighteous rulers of the earth had everything to fear from the Gospel. Those who oppose God can expect his wrath, while those who hear his voice, show compassion, and seek justice will possess God forever. The message is uncompromising, but in times of persecution and exile, moral and political chaos, and personal tragedy—the very times in which the

Institutes found its first readers—who derives comfort from equivocation?

How individuals and communities responded to Calvin—with enthusiasm, indifference, or malignity—determined the reception of his *Institutes*. Such complex history is not a tale easily conveyed in a short, highly selective book, and no doubt Calvin would disapprove of the absence of his beloved *luciditas* in what follows. I'll save my apologies for any future encounter. For my part, I am content to render one service, and that is to dissuade readers that the following chapters are about a dreary theological treatise by a bearded killjoy. The *Institutes* is an extended hymn of praise by an exiled Frenchman to a saving God he believed never abandoned the faithful. It was deeply personal. Faith, Calvin writes, is to know that God is Father.