

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

John Calvin

*Translated from the first French edition of 1541
by
Robert White*



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL, UK

P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

ENGLISH-SPEAKING readers of Calvin's major theological work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, have long had access to a number of translations of which the first, by Thomas Norton, dates from 1561. The quality of Norton's work is evidenced by the fact that it was reprinted, with only minor amendments, for well over two hundred years, being replaced in the nineteenth century by the version of John Allen (1813) and later by that of Henry Beveridge (1845). These have now been largely superseded by the two-volume work published in 1960 in the Library of Christian Classics series, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles.¹

All of these versions are based on the Latin text of the last edition of the *Institutes*, printed in Geneva by Robert Estienne in the summer of 1559. A French edition prepared by Calvin followed in 1560. In its final, definitive form, the *Institutes* are a work of rare brilliance, providing as they do a wide-ranging introduction to biblical theology and an authoritative statement of Reformed doctrine.

Almost a quarter of a century separates the first edition of the *Institutes* from the last. The work, first published in Latin in 1536, was intended as a concise manual or primer which would set out the essentials—what Calvin calls 'certain rudiments'—of the Christian faith. The author sought above all to satisfy the needs of those who, as yet, knew little of the gospel, but who 'were hungering and thirsting for Christ' and who ultimately 'might be trained in true piety'.² Calvin's treatise

¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

² Calvin, *Opera selecta*, ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Kaiser, 1926-1952), 1:21.

thus has the appearance of an extended catechism. Indeed its first five chapters, devoted to the law, faith, prayer, the true sacraments and the false, follow the classic pattern of Luther's catechisms.³ That the book also had an apologetic value, allowing the author to defend persecuted believers against the charges of heresy and sedition, and to contrast the evangelical faith with the teachings of Rome and of certain radical sects, was a further incentive to publication.

The success of the 1536 *Institutes* and the Reformer's own desire for a fuller exposition of the faith account for a second, much enlarged, Latin edition of 1539, and for the decision to publish, in 1541, a French version intended no longer for educated Latin-speakers, but for a much bigger audience of Calvin's countrymen, in order to enable them to 'further profit in God's school'.⁴ Thereafter, from edition to edition, the work grew, thanks to a steady accumulation of knowledge, exegetical progress, pastoral experience and the relentless pressure of theological debate both within and beyond the Reformed camp. The addition of new material, together with the expansion of the existing text, produced major Latin revisions in 1543 and 1550, which in turn gave rise to the French editions of 1545 and 1551. All told, the *Institutes* passed through six Latin editions and three French before receiving their final form.⁵

To Ford Lewis Battles we owe not only the most recent English translation of the 1559 *Institutes* but also that of the first edition of 1536.⁶ The English-speaking reader is thus able to gauge the distance separating Calvin's first comprehensive essay in theology from his last. Quantitatively, the distance is very great. The massive treatise of four

³ Cf. François Wendel, *Calvin, the Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), p. 112. A sixth and final chapter dealt broadly with issues of Christian freedom and Christian citizenship.

⁴ 'Outline of the Present Book', in *Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick and Berlin, 1863-1900), 3:xxiii. (Hereafter cited as *CO*.)

⁵ Bibliographical details are given by Rodolphe Peter and Jean-François Gilmont, *Bibliotheca calviniana*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1991-2000). See also Gilmont, *Jean Calvin et le livre imprimé* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), pp. 63-70.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. and ed. F. L. Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: H. H. Meeter Centre for Calvin Studies/William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

books totalling eighty chapters presents a stark contrast to the six modest chapters of the original, and is over five times as long. In outward form and in the arrangement of subject matter, the differences could not be clearer. Qualitatively, however, the distance is not so great as to imply a fundamental change in the way theology is done. From first to last the Reformer's aim is to enunciate a theology of grace and glory, and to permit Scripture to determine both the content and the scope of his enterprise.

Among the intermediate editions of the *Institutes*, the second Latin edition of 1539 and its counterpart, the first French edition of 1541, are of pivotal importance. To begin with, as has often been remarked, Calvin has chosen to recast his work in a new and different mould. Instead of a work of basic *catechesis*, he has composed a much more ambitious treatise in which major doctrines are presented topically, allowing the reader to proceed methodically from the knowledge of God and of man to the law, repentance, justification by faith, the relation of the Old Testament to the New, prayer, the sacraments, the powers of the church, civil government and the Christian life. The author's treatment of earlier issues, such as revelation, the uses of the law, the nature of faith, the Trinity, Christology and the church, is greatly expanded. There is a vigorous defence of infant baptism in the face of Anabaptist objections to the practice. For the first time the twofold doctrine of election and reprobation is introduced as a corollary of the doctrine of providence. A final chapter on the believer's inner life stresses the need for self-denial and for conformity to Christ; a model of pastoral sensitivity, it was destined to enter the last edition of the *Institutes* virtually unchanged.

Two and a half times longer than the edition they replaced, the *Institutes* of 1539/41 represent a more significant revision than any Calvin undertook prior to 1559. In addition, however, the work marks an important advance in terms of the audience the Reformer seeks to address. Without forgetting the general reader who still continues to 'hunger and thirst for Christ', Calvin now offers to assist the serious student of theology who requires instruction in 'the sum of religion in all its parts'. To such, help is promised in the reading and understanding of Scripture, 'so that whoever comprehends the form of teaching set

down here may easily judge ... what he should look for in Scripture and to what end he should relate its contents'.⁷ In its new form the treatise is well on the way to becoming a complete theological source book. The uninitiated will certainly find within its pages 'the doctrine of salvation', yet they must now share the work with a different, more sophisticated class of reader—in effect, with those who have a passion for theology. The revised work constitutes, in Wendel's words, 'a properly dogmatic introduction to holy Scripture'.⁸

There is yet another sense in which the Reformer's new work signals a change to his original concept. To the chagrin of those who persist in making Calvin the man of one book, the *Institutes* can no longer be viewed in splendid isolation. On the point of completing, in 1539, his first biblical commentary—on Paul's letter to the Romans—Calvin posits a close reciprocal relationship between the two. 'In my commentaries ... there will be no need for me to argue at length about the subjects raised, since the present book [the *Institutes*] provides overall direction for those who wish to be helped.'⁹ The perils of redundancy are neatly avoided by the expedient of allowing the dogmatist to dogmatize, and the commentator to exegete, but with due recognition of their mutual dependence. The *Institutes* are thus a companion piece to Calvin's entire work of biblical exposition, and vice versa. They systematically assemble and explain the heads of doctrine distilled by the exegete from the books of Scripture. They are a general guide designed to aid the progress of the reader through the sacred text. They constitute the ultimate fruit of a patient labour of biblical analysis and interpretation.

In each of these ways the *Institutes* of 1539/41 set a pattern with which, differences of scale and organization notwithstanding, subsequent editions agree. They have been less successful, however, in attracting the attention of English translators, as the example of Norton, Allen, Beveridge and Battles shows. Calvin would doubtless have approved their preference for his finished work. However not all readers have found the definitive *Institutes* an easy and convenient entry into the

⁷ 'Calvin to the Reader', *CO* 3:7-8.

⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 146.

⁹ 'Calvin to the Reader', *CO* 3:7-8. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2nd ed., 1993), pp. 87-90.

Reformer's thought: hence the popularity of the digests, compendia and abridgments which, from the sixteenth century onward, have sought to reduce the work to manageable proportions and to secure for its author the best possible hearing. Karl Barth's description of the *Institutes* as a 'primeval forest' may not commend itself to everyone, but the phrase aptly conveys the difficulties likely to confront the potential reader.¹⁰

* * * * *

The present work was begun some years ago in the belief that an English translation of the 1539/41 *Institutes* was long overdue, and since the French version was addressed in a more familiar style and to a much wider audience than the Latin, it was that which was selected for translation. I have worked from the original edition of 1541, which is not, however, exempt from errors and omissions. I have therefore taken account of the corrections made by Calvin in subsequent revisions of his text, and have also included a number of emendations proposed by later editors of the work.¹¹ No fewer than three modern editions of the 1541 *Institutes* exist: the first edited by Abel Lefranc, Henri Châtelain and Jacques Pannier in 1911, the second by Jacques Pannier in 1936-1939, and the third by Olivier Millet in 2008.¹²

Translators are often forced to make difficult decisions when it comes to individual words. Since Calvin draws no real distinction between *amour*, *dilection* and *charité*, I have rendered all three by 'love', but with an occasional preference for 'charity'. Conversely the single word *concupiscence*, used always in an unfavourable sense, has sometimes been translated 'lust', but more often 'evil desire', 'base appetite' or, in one or two places, 'covetousness', since it designates not a specific sin but the root of all sin, that warped principle which impels fallen humanity

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 160.

¹¹ For Calvin's corrections, see the detailed variants listed by Jean-Daniel Benoît in his five-volume edition of the French text of 1560, *Institution de la religion chrestienne* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957-1963).

¹² *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, ed. Abel Lefranc, 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1911); *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, ed. J. Pannier, 4 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1936-1939; 2nd ed. 1961); *Institution de la religion chrétienne (1541)*, ed. O. Millet, 2 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 2008).

when deprived of God's grace to choose and act wrongly. French *justice* means both 'justice' and 'righteousness'; the latter meaning fits most contexts, but I have tended to prefer 'justice' where the doctrine of predestination is in view. I have generally dispensed with the title 'Saint', except in relation to the cult of a particular saint. Despite my fondness for the Sorbonne, I am obliged to preserve the dismissive terms in which Calvin often speaks of his, and my, alma mater: 'Sophist', 'Sorbonist' and 'Sorbonic'.

I have endeavoured to allow the author of the *Institutes* to speak as naturally in English as he does in French, but given both his age and the seriousness of his themes, he cannot, and should not, be made to speak exactly as one of us. As a rough but reasonable rule of thumb, the principle advocated by John Allen in his work of 1813—'a medium between servility and looseness'—has much to recommend it.¹³ Too much of the first and the text ceases to be English; too much of the second and it ceases to be Calvin's.¹⁴

The chapter headings are Calvin's own, but the sub-headings within each chapter are mine. It is hoped that they will prove helpful to the reader. Bible references, given as marginal notes in the original edition, here appear in the text itself, and have been translated in the form in which the author cites or paraphrases them. They do not necessarily correspond to any standard English version. Modern conventions regarding punctuation, sentence length and paragraph division have been observed. Since much of the 1539/41 *Institutes* is preserved in the definitive editions of 1559/60, and since the latter texts have been extensively annotated by successive editors, I have kept my own notes to a minimum. They aim chiefly to identify the works to which the Reformer refers, the opponents—and, occasionally, the friends—with whom he takes issue, and certain historical allusions which he takes for granted. Those familiar with French will find much help in Olivier

¹³ J. Allen, 'Translator's Preface', *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (repr. Philadelphia/London: Westminster Press/James Clarke & Co., 1935), p. 10.

¹⁴ Note, in passing, the publication in 2009 of an English translation of the *Institutes* of 1541 by Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans). Readers are referred to my review of the work in *The Banner of Truth*, No. 565 (October 2010), pp. 26-27.

Miller's splendidly annotated edition. For readers who wish to match the 1541 *Institutes* with the French edition of 1560, a comparative table is provided in an appendix. A fuller and more precise table, however, will be found in the critical edition of Jean-Daniel Benoît.¹⁵

* * * * *

The present work has been undertaken with the needs of various readers in mind. Those already familiar with Calvin will, we trust, welcome the attempt to make the Reformer speak English yet again. The general reader who seeks to discover the message of the Reformation in its own words, and to understand it not simply as a protest against clerical decadence or tyranny but as a sustained effort to recapture the vital truths of Christianity, will have a clear and comprehensive text to guide him, as will the student who wishes to follow Calvin's intellectual and spiritual itinerary from one edition of the *Institutes* to another. Those with a more specialist interest in the history of doctrine or in the nature and scope of biblical theology will find much here which is directly relevant to them. All, it is hoped, will be touched by the Reformer's search for a language adequate to express the twin mysteries of God's great glory and of his goodness to the children of men.

In the 'Outline' which prefaces his French *Institutes* of 1541, Calvin adopts the familiar authorial convention of refusing to claim too much for his book. 'I do not dare,' he writes, 'to speak too confidently about it, or to say how profitable the reading of it might be, lest I appear to think too highly of my work.' He nevertheless expresses the hope that it may prove to be 'a key and opening, allowing all God's children access to a true and proper understanding of holy Scripture'.¹⁶ The role which, over the centuries, the *Institutes* have played in the life and thought of the Christian church, and in Western culture more generally, suggests that his hope was not misplaced.

ROBERT WHITE

Sydney

February, 2014

¹⁵ J-D. Benoît (ed.), *Institution de la religion chrestienne* (1560), 5:17-43.

¹⁶ CO 3:xxiii.

OUTLINE OF THE PRESENT BOOK

TO enable readers to make better use of the present book, I wish briefly to explain in what way it may prove helpful to them. In the process I will point to what it is they should be aiming at and what they should be looking for as they read. Although the teaching contained in holy Scripture is perfect and cannot be added to, since there our Lord has chosen to display the infinite treasures of his wisdom, nevertheless someone who is not well trained in it needs a certain amount of guidance and direction in order to know what to look for, what mistakes to avoid and what path he may safely keep to: that way he will be sure of attaining the goal to which the Holy Spirit is calling him.

That is why those who have received more light from God than others have a duty here to assist the inexperienced, and as it were to extend a hand which will guide and help them find the sum of all that God has sought to teach us in his word. Now there is no better way of doing this in Scripture than through a study of the principal and weightiest themes which go to make up Christian philosophy. For the person who understands these things is better placed to make more progress in God's school in one day than another might in three months, since he knows more or less to what he should relate each theme, and he has a rule by which he can measure everything presented to him.

Convinced, then, that this kind of help was necessary to all who want to be taught the doctrine of salvation, I have endeavoured, according to the ability given me by the Lord, to do just that. That has been my aim in composing the present book. Initially I wrote it in Latin, so as to meet the needs of all who are fond of study, whatever their nationality. Later, desiring to pass on whatever benefits the book might have for my French countrymen, I translated it into our own tongue.

I do not dare to speak too confidently about it, or to say how profitable the reading of it might be, lest I appear to think too highly of my work. This, however, I can promise: it can serve as a key and opening, allowing all God's children access to a true and proper understanding of holy Scripture. In the future, therefore, if our Lord gives me the means and opportunity to write commentaries, I will be as brief as possible. There will be no need for lengthy digressions, since I have here provided a detailed explanation of almost all the articles which concern the Christian faith. And since we must recognize that all truth and sound doctrine comes from God, I am bold to declare in all sincerity what I think of this work, acknowledging that it is God's rather than mine, and that the praise for it should be his.

So I urge all who revere the Lord's word to read and carefully impress it on their memory, if they wish first to know the sum of Christian doctrine and then to benefit from a reading of both Old and New Testaments. If they do this, they will find from experience that I have not tried to deceive them with words. Anyone who cannot understand everything that Scripture contains should not for that reason lose heart. He should always move on, hoping that one passage will provide a readier explanation of the other. Above all, the reader is well advised to resort to Scripture in order to weigh up the testimonies which I cite from it.

PREFATORY LETTER TO FRANCIS I

*TO THE MOST HIGH, MOST MIGHTY AND MOST
ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE, FRANCIS, MOST CHRISTIAN
KING OF FRANCE, HIS PRINCE AND SOVEREIGN LORD,
JOHN CALVIN, PEACE AND DELIVERANCE IN GOD*

IN the beginning, most noble King, when I set out to write the present book, I had no thought of writing something which might be offered to your Majesty. My sole purpose was to teach certain rudiments which might allow those who were touched with a sincere feeling for God to learn true piety. I chiefly wished my efforts to benefit our fellow Frenchmen, many of whom I saw to be hungering and thirsting for Jesus Christ, yet very few of whom had received a proper knowledge of him. Evidence of my intention will be easily found in this book, in that I have adapted it to the simplest form of instruction of which I was capable.

However, observing that certain wicked men had stirred up such fury in your kingdom that no place remained for wholesome doctrine,¹ I thought it worthwhile to use the present book both for the instruction of those I had originally meant to teach, and as a confession of faith for yourself, so that you might know what this teaching is which so inflames the rage of those who today, by fire and sword, are troubling your kingdom. For I am not at all ashamed to say that here I have included almost the full sum of that very teaching which they believe should be punished

¹ A transparent allusion to the ultra-orthodox theologians of the Sorbonne and to their allies in the Paris *Parlement*. Throughout the letter they are identified as resolute adversaries who have the king's ear.

by prison, exile, proscription and fire, and which they shout should be driven from both land and sea.

Plight of the persecuted

I know full well with what dreadful reports they have filled your ears and your heart, in order to make our cause totally abhorrent to you. Reflect, however, in your mildness and mercy, that no shred of innocence, either in word or deed, would remain if it were enough merely to accuse. To be sure, anyone who sought to arouse hatred of the doctrine which I shall try to explain to you might argue that it has already been condemned by the common consent of all classes of society, and that many adverse judgments have been pronounced against it. But this would simply be to say that it has been, in part, savagely struck down by the power and complicity of its enemies, and in part evilly oppressed by their lies, deceits, slanders and treachery. Brute violence alone explains why cruel sentences are passed on it before any defence has been offered. Fraud and treachery alone account for the fact that it is arbitrarily branded seditious and wicked.

Lest it be thought that our complaints are groundless, you, most excellent King, are our witness that every day false slanders against our doctrine are brought before you. The claim is made that it has no other aim than to destroy government and good order, to upset the peace, to abolish laws, to scatter all lordly powers and estates—in short, to bring everything down in ruin. For all that, you hear only the smallest part of what is being said. Among the common folk terrible rumours about our teaching are being spread which, if they were true, would, in the eyes of all, justly condemn it and its authors to a thousand deaths by fire and gibbet. Is it any wonder now that the whole world hates it, since everyone believes such wicked calumnies? That is why all classes with one accord conspire to condemn both us and our teaching. Those who preside as judges, seized with this kind of passion, pronounce verdicts based on home-grown prejudice, and fancy that they have admirably done their duty if they condemn to death only those who, on their own admission or on the solid testimony of others, have been convicted. But of what crime? Of that accursed doctrine, they say. But by what law is it

judged accused? Now the heart of their defence was not to disavow this doctrine but to uphold it as true. Yet nowhere are they allowed even to open their mouths!

It is thus with good reason, most illustrious King, that I ask you to acquaint yourself thoroughly with this case, which up till now has been handled in a muddled way, with no respect for legal process, and with reckless zeal rather than with judicial calm and gravity. Nor should you assume that here I mean to make my own defence, so as to secure the right to return to the country of my birth. Although I feel a natural and proper love for it, as things stand I do not especially grieve to be apart from it. Instead I defend the common cause of all believers, indeed Christ's own cause, which in your kingdom today is so wholly torn and trampled down as to appear hopeless. This indeed has come about through the tyranny of certain Pharisees rather than through your own design. How all this has happened is not something which needs to be explained here. The fact is that our cause is grievously afflicted, for the power of God's enemies has prevailed to the point that Christ's truth lies hidden and buried as an object of shame, although it has not been lost or scattered. Also, God's poor little church has been either devoured by cruel deaths, driven into exile, or so overawed by threats and terrors that it dares not utter a word. And still, frenzied as ever, they persist in demolishing the wall which they have already undermined and in completing the destruction they have begun.

In the meantime no one steps forward to offer a defence against their furious assaults. And if some are happy to be seen as strongly sympathetic to the truth, they argue that the folly and ignorance of such simple folk should somehow be excused. Those are the very terms they use. 'Folly' and 'ignorance' are how they describe God's assured truth; 'simple folk' is what they call those who are so dear to the Lord that he has made them privy to the secrets of his heavenly wisdom. Such is the shame they all feel for the gospel!

It behoves you, most gracious King, not to turn your ears or your heart from so legitimate a defence, particularly in a matter of such moment—namely, how God's glory may be upheld on earth, how his truth may preserve its honour and dignity, and how Christ's kingdom

CHAPTER I

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

THE whole sum of our wisdom—wisdom, that is, which deserves to be called true and assured—broadly consists of two parts, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.

The purpose of the first of these is to show not only that there is one God whom all must worship and honour, but also that he is the fount of all truth, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, judgment, mercy, power and holiness. We must learn, therefore, to expect and ask these things from him, and with praise and thanksgiving to acknowledge that they come from him. The purpose of the second is to show us our weakness, misery, vanity and vileness, to fill us with despair, distrust and hatred of ourselves, and then to kindle in us the desire to seek God, for in him is found all that is good and of which we ourselves are empty and deprived.

Now it is not easy to discern which of the two comes first and so gives rise to the other. For since in man there lies a world of utter misery, we cannot rightly observe ourselves without painfully feeling our misfortune, and without at once lifting our eyes toward God so as to attain at least a partial knowledge of him. Thus in recognizing our lowliness, ignorance and vanity, as well as our perversity and corruption, we come to understand that true greatness, wisdom, truth, righteousness and purity reside in God. Lastly, we are impelled by our miseries to reflect on the Lord's good gifts, and we cannot sincerely yearn for him until we have first begun to cease being pleased with ourselves. What man, after all, does not willingly choose to have confidence in himself? Who does not feel confident as long as, knowing nothing of himself, he is content with his own abilities and fails to appreciate his plight? That is why

self-knowledge not only encourages us to seek after God but guides and practically leads us by the hand to find him.

Self-knowledge impossible without the knowledge of God

Conversely, we observe that no one ever attains clear knowledge of self unless he has first gazed upon the face of the Lord, and then turns back to look upon himself. Deeply rooted in all of us is an arrogance which persuades us that we are righteous, truthful, wise and holy. Only clear evidence that we are unrighteous, deceitful, foolish and vile will convince us of the contrary. We feel no such conviction if all we do is look upon ourselves and not also upon the Lord. He is the one and only standard with which our judgment must accord. But because hypocrisy is something to which we are all naturally prone, we are quite content with an empty show of righteousness rather than with its reality. And because there is nothing around us which is not greatly defiled, whatever is a little less grubby appears to us as purity itself, as long as we confine our attention to the limits of our own—debased—humanity. It is like the eye which, used to seeing only objects that are dark, judges things which are vaguely white or even semi-grey to be the whitest there is.

An analogy based on physical sight will help us better understand how badly we misjudge our soul's powers. If in broad daylight we look down at the ground or attend to things which are round about us, we have no trouble believing our sight is extremely sharp and keen. When, however, we look straight up at the sun, the power that served us so well on earth is dazed and dazzled by so intense a light, forcing us to admit that our ability clearly to see earthly objects is weak and feeble when it comes to gazing at the sun. This is how it is when we try to estimate our spiritual strengths. As long as we do not look beyond earth's horizons, we are perfectly content with our own righteousness, wisdom and power. We flatter and congratulate ourselves, and are not far from thinking we are demigods! If, however, we turn our thoughts toward the Lord and realize how consummate is his righteousness, wisdom and power which are the standard to which we must conform, what we once took to be righteousness will appear foul and utterly evil; what we wrongly thought of as a miracle of wisdom will be seen to be pure folly; what we regarded

as power will turn out to be wretched feebleness; indeed, what we reckon to be perfectly blameless in us will never match the purity to be found in God.

Hence the terror and dread which, as Scripture often relates, seized believers whenever they felt the presence of God. We read about those who, in the Lord's absence, stood firm and assured, but who, when suddenly confronted by his glory, shook with fear, seized as it were by the pangs of death and almost annihilated. From this it is clear that we are led to acknowledge our frailty only when we have measured ourselves against the majesty of God. Many instances of this kind of dread are found in the Book of Judges and also in the prophets, so much so that God's people had a common saying: 'We will surely die, since the Lord has appeared to us' (*Judg.* 6:22-23; 13:22; *Ezek.* 1:28 *etc.*). That too is why the story of Job, in order to humble men by showing them their folly, weakness and defilement, chiefly appeals for proof to a consideration of God's wisdom, power and purity. It does so with good reason. For we read that the closer Abraham got to contemplating the glory of the Lord, the more he realized that he was but earth and dust (*Gen.* 18:27). Elijah similarly could not await God's appearance with his face uncovered, so afraid was he to gaze on him (*1 Kings* 19:13). What then might man do, who is mere vermin and rotteness, when even the cherubim must veil their faces in great fear and reverence (*Isa.* 6:2-5)? As the prophet Isaiah declares, the sun will be ashamed and the moon confounded when the Lord of hosts shall reign (*Isa.* 24:23)—that is, when he lifts up and puts forth his light, all else that is brightest will, in comparison, grow dark.

Nevertheless, however mutually connected are the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, there is a proper order which requires us to give priority to the knowledge of God; from there we will come back to the other.

An awareness of God is common to all

We regard it as beyond dispute that there is in the mind of man, by natural inclination, a certain feeling for divinity, so that no one should seek refuge by claiming ignorance. The Lord has instilled in everyone some understanding of his majesty, so that all, having learned that there is one God and that he is their Creator, should be condemned by their

own testimony because they have failed to honour him and to devote their lives to doing his will. To be sure, if we look for evidence that men have existed who were unaware of God and who had no knowledge of him, nothing could very likely be found except, perhaps, among the most ignorant of peoples who are furthest removed from civilization and humanity. Yet, as even the heathen admit, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so wild that it does not have a heartfelt impression that there is a God.¹ And those who in other areas of their lives seem scarcely to differ from brute beasts, nevertheless preserve some seed of religion, so rooted is this universal concept in every mind, and so firmly fixed in every heart.

Therefore since from the beginning of the world no country, town or even household has managed to do without religion, there we have a tacit admission that in the heart of every human being is stamped a feeling for divinity. Idolatry itself gives abundant proof of this idea. For we know how far man contrives to abase himself, however reluctantly, and how ready he is to honour other creatures in preference to himself. So because he would rather honour wood and stone than be reckoned to have no god at all, we can clearly see how strong is this perception of divine majesty: man can less easily wipe it from his mind than he can deny his own natural inclinations. Deny them he does, when he lays aside his haughty arrogance and willingly humbles himself before the vilest creatures on earth, in order to pay God homage.

That is why it is false to assert, as some do, that religion was forged in olden times by the craft and cunning of a few, in order to keep common folk under control, even though those who urged others to honour God had no concept themselves of deity.² Now I freely admit that some sly and scheming individuals among the heathen invented a good many things in religion, intimidating ordinary people and filling their minds with scruples so as to make them more obedient and docile. However, they would never have had their way if men were not already firmly persuaded that there was a God. This is the reason men were so ready

¹ The reference is to Cicero's essay *The Nature of the Gods*, I.16.43.

² Again, Cicero's *Nature of the Gods* (I.42.118) appears to be Calvin's source. The idea is found, however, in other writers, including Plato (*Laws*, X.889E) and Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Professors*, IX.54).

CHAPTER 8

THE PREDESTINATION AND PROVIDENCE OF GOD

IT is a fact that the covenant of life is not equally preached to everyone, and even where it is preached it is not equally welcomed by all. In this diversity an extraordinary secret of God's judgment is revealed, for there is no doubt that this difference serves his good pleasure. Now if it is obvious that it is by God's will that salvation is offered to some while others are excluded from it, this gives rise to weighty and highly important questions which can only be resolved when believers are taught what they should know about God's election and predestination.

There are two aspects to this question. First we must consider what is meant when we say that some are predestined to salvation and others to damnation. Second, we must make clear in what way the world is ruled by God's providence, since everything that happens depends on his determination.

Scripture, not idle curiosity or natural reticence, must be our guide

But before proceeding further with my argument, I must as a preliminary address two sorts of people. Given that the controversy over predestination is itself somewhat obscure, men's curiosity makes it involved, perplexing and even dangerous because the human mind cannot refrain from following every twist and turn and climbing far too high. It would like, if that were possible, to allow God no secrets which it does not pore over and carefully examine. Since we see many who fall into this kind of

boldness and presumption—many indeed who are not otherwise bad¹—we ought to advise them about the best course of action.

First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are entering the sanctuary of divine wisdom. Anyone who pries into it and who delves too brashly and confidently will never reach the point where he satisfies his curiosity, but will stumble into a labyrinth from which he will find no way out. For it is not right that the things which God has sought to conceal and whose knowledge he has kept for himself should be scrutinized in this way by men. Nor is it right that the lofty wisdom which he wished us to revere rather than comprehend, so that we might wonder at his greatness, should be made subject to the human mind or sought out in the depths of his eternity. As for the secrets of his will which he thought good to impart to us, he has borne witness to them in his word. And what he thought good to impart to us was everything which he knew would be relevant and rewarding to us. Once we grasp the idea that God's word is the only path which allows us to investigate all that we may lawfully know about him, and is likewise the only light by which we behold all that may be lawfully seen of him, it will easily stop us from acting impulsively. For then we will realize that by going beyond the bounds of Scripture we will be straying off into darkness, and will inevitably with every step wander, stumble and trip up.

Above all else, let us firmly set this truth before us: to desire a knowledge of predestination beyond what God's word provides is no less mad than to choose to walk over insurmountable rocks or to see in the darkness. And let us not be ashamed, where this topic is concerned, to be ignorant of some things in which a degree of ignorance is more learned than knowledge itself. We ought rather to be happy abstaining from the search for knowledge, the appetite for which is foolish and dangerous, not to say pernicious. If intellectual curiosity should tempt us, let us always have this saying ready to hand in order to resist it: 'He who looks into the mystery of God will be overwhelmed by his glory' (cf. *Prov.* 25:27, alt.). For it will surely discourage our foolhardiness when we see that all it does is drive us to disaster.

¹ A probable reference to Zwingli, whose treatise *On Providence* (1530) Calvin criticized chiefly for its unnecessary complexity and speculative bias.

On the other hand there are others who, wishing to remedy this evil, do their best to see that all memory of predestination is practically erased. At the very least, they warn that we should avoid inquiring into it in any way, as if it were something dangerous.² We commend the moderation they display when they advocate great restraint in the way we approach God's mysteries. Nevertheless they descend too low, in that they do nothing which might benefit the thinking mind which cannot be so easily reined in. Hence, in order to preserve the right balance, we must return to the word of God, which is the proper rule for attaining assured knowledge. Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit. In it, just as nothing has been omitted which is salutary and useful to know, so nothing has been taught which cannot profitably be understood.

We must thus take care that we do not stop believers examining what Scripture says concerning predestination, lest we appear to want to rob them of the blessing which God has given them, or to blame the Holy Spirit for revealing things which might better have been suppressed. Let us then allow the Christian to open his ears and his mind to every teaching which God has for him, provided he always observes the discipline of closing the path to further inquiry once he sees that God has closed his holy lips. The limits of sobriety will be firmly set if, as we learn, we follow God and always allow him to go ahead of us. Conversely, when he ceases to teach, may we stop wanting to know more. The danger feared by those good souls of whom we have spoken is not so great that we should avoid opening our ears to all that God says.

The objections of sceptics are of no account

I admit that on the subject of predestination evildoers and blasphemers immediately find much to blame, to quibble over, to snap at or to ridicule. But if we feared their spite, we would have to keep quiet about the main articles of our faith, hardly any of which they do not defile with their blasphemies. A recalcitrant individual will rush to arms no less readily on hearing that in God's being there are three persons, than when he is told that in creating man, God foresaw what would befall

² Calvin appears to have Melancthon's *Loci communes* in mind, the 1535 edition of which warns against excessive speculation regarding predestination. Similar misgivings were voiced in Switzerland by the Bernese authorities.

him. Similarly, these wicked people cannot resist a laugh when told that barely five thousand years have passed since the world was created, for they ask how it is that God's power should have been idle for so long. To put an end to such sacrilege, must we cease speaking of the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit? Must we say nothing about the creation of the world? On the contrary, God's truth is so powerful, here as everywhere else, that it does not fear the slanders of sinful men.

The same point is very well expressed by Augustine in the small work entitled *The Gift of Perseverance*. For we learn that the false apostles, in censuring and denigrating Paul's teaching, never succeeded in making him ashamed of it. Some indeed regard this whole debate as dangerous even among believers, because it works against exhortation, disturbs faith, troubles hearts and drives them to despair. That, however, is a pitiful claim to make. Augustine makes no secret of the fact that these arguments were used to rebuke him for preaching predestination too freely. But he competently refutes them, which was not difficult for him to do.³ In our case, because many absurdities of different kinds have been levelled at the teaching which we will outline, it would be better to postpone till later the task of resolving each in turn.

For the moment I would appeal to all men generally not to attempt to look into things which God has chosen to keep hidden, but also not to neglect those which he has openly revealed, lest he condemn us on the one hand for excessive curiosity, and on the other for ingratitude. For what Augustine says is most appropriate: 'We may safely follow Scripture, which condescends to our lowliness as a mother might to her child's weakness, when she wants to teach him to walk.'⁴

Some essential definitions

The Fathers of the early church explained in different ways the terms 'foreknowledge', 'predestination', 'election' and 'providence'. We, avoiding all unnecessary controversy, will simply follow the natural sense of the words. When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that everything has always been, and forever remains, in his full view, so that

³ Augustine, *The Gift of Perseverance*, XIV.34-35; XX.52.

⁴ Augustine, *On Genesis in the Literal Sense*, V.3,6.

CHAPTER 16

CIVIL GOVERNMENT

WE have established that man is subject to two jurisdictions, and have already spoken very fully about the first, which resides in the soul or the inner man, and concerns eternal life.¹ This, then, is the place where we must also examine the second, which has to do solely with the ordering of civil justice and the reforming of outward morals.

First, before going further into this question, we must recall the distinction made earlier, so as to avoid the mistake commonly made by many who thoughtlessly confuse these two very different things. For such people, on learning that the gospel promises us a freedom which acknowledges no human king or master but one which is bound only to Christ, do not believe that they can gain anything from their freedom as long as they are conscious of a power which stands above them. As a result, they think that no progress is possible unless the world is transformed into one which knows neither judgments nor laws nor magistrates nor anything similar which, they believe, hampers their freedom.² Anyone, however, who is capable of distinguishing between body and soul, between this present transitory life and the life to come which is eternal, will quite clearly understand that Christ's spiritual kingdom and civil society are not at all the same.

¹ See above, Chapter 14, pp. 708-711, 718-719.

² A probable reference to the Anabaptists, who viewed the secular order as corrupt and who forbade involvement in public affairs. According to the Schleithem Confession (1527), the holding of public office, the resort to litigation and the punitive powers of the magistracy belonged to a carnal order opposed to the perfection of Christ. See above, Prefatory Letter to Francis I, note 10.

Christ's kingdom compared with earthly governments

Since, therefore, it is a mark of Jewish folly to look for and enclose Christ's kingdom within the elements of this world, and since we think instead as Scripture plainly teaches that it is spiritual fruit which we receive from Christ's grace, let us take care to keep within its limits the liberty promised and offered to us in him. For why does the very apostle who bids us stand fast and not submit to the yoke of slavery (*Gal. 5:1*), elsewhere teach slaves not to worry about their condition (*1 Cor. 7:20-21*), if not because spiritual freedom and civil bondage can fully coexist? This too is how we should interpret such statements of Paul as these: 'In God's kingdom there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free' (*Gal. 3:28*). Again: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither barbarian nor Scythian, but Christ is all in all' (*Col. 3:11*). In saying this Paul shows that it does not matter what our standing is among men, or by what nation's laws we live, because Christ's kingdom lies in none of these things.

Nevertheless this distinction should not lead us to regard government as something corrupt and of no relevance to Christians. It is quite true today that some fanatics speak in this way, claiming that since we have died in Christ to the elements of this world and have been transferred to God's kingdom among the heavenly beings (*Eph. 2:6*), it is too base an act, unworthy of our eminence, to concern ourselves with the unclean and profane business of this world from which Christians should be entirely divorced and separated. What, they say, is the use of laws without lawsuits and legal judgments? And what do lawsuits have to do with Christians? Indeed, if it is unlawful to murder, what is the point of having laws and judgments?

But just as we stated a little while ago that this kind of government is different from Christ's spiritual, inner rule, so now we must see that it is in no way opposed to it. For while we are still on earth his spiritual rule allows us a first taste of the heavenly kingdom, and in this mortal, fleeting life, some flavour of immortal, imperishable bliss. However, the purpose of temporal government is to fit us for human society for as long as we are part of it, to teach us to behave equitably among men, to reconcile us with one another and to promote and preserve public peace and calm.

All such things, I admit, would be superfluous if God's kingdom, as it now is in us, were to blot out this present life. But if God wills us to live on earth while still yearning for our true homeland, and if such helps are needed for our journey, those who would deprive man of them deny him his human nature. For in arguing that God's church ought to possess a perfection more than adequate for any law, they stupidly imagine a perfection which could never be found among any group of people. For because the impudence of the wicked is so great and their evil so defiant as scarcely to be contained by the rigour of the laws, what might we expect from them if they felt they had complete licence to do wrong, since force itself can hardly stop their villainy?

Civil government: its uses and institutions

We will have occasion later, in a more appropriate place, to discuss the usefulness of government. For the moment we wish simply to stress that it is a cruel barbarity to want to reject it, for it is as necessary to men as bread, water, sun and air, and its value is so much greater. For it is not merely concerned with what people eat and drink and with how life is sustained, although it includes all those things by allowing men to live together. It involves more than that: it aims to see that idolatry, blasphemies against God's name and his truth, and other offences against religion are not openly promoted and spread among the people; that the public peace is not disturbed; that each person keeps what is his and that men live together without injury or dishonesty; in short, that among Christians there should be an open expression of religion, and that in society humanity should prevail.

It should not be thought strange that I now entrust to public authority the proper ordering of religion, a responsibility which I earlier appeared to place outside of human control.³ For here I do not allow men to devise whatever laws they like regarding religion and God's worship, any more than I did before, although I approve civil regulation which ensures that true religion, as contained in God's law, is not openly transgressed and defiled with impunity. But if we examine each aspect of civil government separately, this method will help readers arrive at the overall judgment which they should make.

³ See above, Chapter 15, pp. 721-722, 727-728.

Now there are three distinct elements. The first is the magistrate, who is the guardian and preserver of the laws. The second is the law itself, according to which the magistrate exercises power. The third is the people, who must be governed by the laws and must obey the magistrate.

The magistrate's vocation

Let us first consider the office of magistrate, that is, whether it is a valid calling and one approved by God, with what duties he is charged and the extent of his powers; second, by what laws a Christian society should be governed; and lastly, what help the people derive from the laws and what obedience they owe to their superiors.

So far as the office of magistrate is concerned, our Lord has not only confirmed that it is acceptable to him but, even more, by adorning it with honourable titles he has commended it to us as especially worthy.⁴ Briefly to prove our point, all who are raised to pre-eminence are called 'gods' (*Exod.* 7:1; *Psa.* 82:1, 6), a title of no small consequence. It shows that they have a commission from God, that they have authority from him and are in every way his representatives, being in a sense his deputies. Nor is that a gloss thought up by myself; it is Christ's own interpretation: 'If Scripture,' he says, 'called them gods to whom the word of God came ...' (*John* 10:35). What else does that imply but that they have a duty and mandate from God to serve him in their office and—as Moses and Jehoshaphat said to the judges whom they appointed over every town in Judah (*Deut.* 1:16-17)—to exercise justice, not in the name of men but in the name of God? This also is the tenor of what God's wisdom declares by the mouth of Solomon, that 'it is by wisdom that kings reign and counsellors do justice, that rulers maintain their dominion and judges judge fairly on earth' (*Prov.* 8:14-16). That is the same as saying that it is not because of men's wilfulness that kings and other leaders acquire power on earth; rather it comes about through the providence and holy

⁴ Throughout this chapter Calvin uses the word 'magistrate' to designate not simply a judge or judicial officer but anyone holding key executive or legislative powers in the State. The term covers both the personal authority of a monarch or other ruler ('king', 'prince'), and the rather more diffuse leadership exercised by eminent public officers ('superiors'). The chapter concludes with a recognition of the role played by lesser magistrates in curbing abuses of power.