

INSTITUTES OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION

BOOK I: OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF
GOD THE CREATOR

JOHN CALVIN

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INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Italo Calvino published his *Invisible Cities*, a fictional work that describes the thirteenth century meeting between the Venetian explorer Marco Polo and the Mongolian regent Kublai Khan. He uses this occasion to expound on the relationship between spheres of ideas and the tangible societies in which they take hold. In the opening chapter of the work, Kublai wistfully reflects upon his domain, stating, “There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening... It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption’s gangrene has spread too far to be healed.”¹ Marco Polo tries to mitigate his melancholy by describing the cities within Kublai’s empire. In a haunting description of the city of Isaura, Marco tells Kublai, “an invisible landscape conditions the visible one.”² That which is unseen (in Isaura, a subterranean body of water) underlies and vivifies our lived experience.

Marco goes on to comment that in the city of Isaura there are conflicting opinions regarding the location of the gods. Some say they live in the lake beneath the city; others claim they live in the

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), 5.

2. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 20.

mechanisms by which water is brought up from beneath the ground. The implication is that access to the gods requires either going down to where they are (though the prospect of doing so is slim) or constructing systems to bring them up. This account of Isaura is a parable of prevailing ways in which humans, throughout time, have come to think about the relation between divinity and the world around us. There are two main ways in which divinity's relation to our day-to-day lives can be understood. With the first, the gods are, for all practical purposes, out of reach. With the second, the gods become identified with the materials and methods used to draw them out of the depths. One outlook is deistic, the other pantheistic. Such is the basic spectrum along which most human religions reside.

Nearly a century earlier, in 1898, Abraham Kuyper delivered his Stone Foundation Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. He took up as his topic Calvinism, which he understood to be a *Weltanschauung* (life-system, or worldview) with relevance for every human sphere, such as religion, politics, science, and art. In expounding on this, on the eve of the twentieth century, he asserted that two "*life systems* are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat," Modernism and Calvinism.³ Kuyper tied the advent of the former to the French Revolution, in which man's liberty was understood as "an emancipation from all Divine Authority."⁴ What began in 1789, he argues, was a "turning point" in human history with continuing consequences: "Modernism has now arisen with violent intensity . . . the principle of that Revolution remains thoroughly *anti-Christian*, and has since spread like a cancer."⁵ For Kuyper, the remedy to this scourge is to be found in one place: the principles of Calvinism, which for him is

3. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Foundation Lectures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1931) 11.

4. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 10.

5. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 10-11.

PREFATORY ADDRESS

*To his most Christian Majesty, the most mighty and illustrious
monarch, Francis, King of the French, his sovereign; John Calvin prays
peace and salvation in Christ*

Sire, when I first engaged in this work, nothing was farther from my thoughts than to write what should afterwards be presented to your Majesty. My intention was only to furnish a kind of rudiments, by which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true godliness. And I toiled at the task chiefly for the sake of my countrymen the French, multitudes of whom I perceived to be hungering and thirsting after Christ, while very few seemed to have been duly imbued with even a slender knowledge of him. That this was the object which I had in view is apparent from the work itself, which is written in a simple and elementary form adapted for instruction.

But when I perceived that the fury of certain bad men had risen to such a height in your realm, that there was no place in it for sound doctrine, I thought it might be of service if I were in the same work both to give instruction to my countrymen, and also lay before your Majesty a Confession, from which you may learn what the doctrine is that so inflames the rage of those madmen who are this day, with fire and sword, troubling your kingdom. For I fear not to declare, that what I have here

given may be regarded as a summary of the very doctrine which, they vociferate, ought to be punished with confiscation, exile, imprisonment, and flames, as well as exterminated by land and sea.

I am aware, indeed, how, in order to render our cause as hateful to your Majesty as possible, they have filled your ears and mind with atrocious insinuations; but you will be pleased, of your clemency, to reflect, that neither in word nor deed could there be any innocence, were it sufficient merely to accuse. When any one, with the view of exciting prejudice, observes that this doctrine, of which I am endeavoring to give your Majesty an account, has been condemned by the suffrages of all the estates, and was long ago stabbed again and again by partial sentences of courts of law, he undoubtedly says nothing more than that it has sometimes been violently oppressed by the power and faction of adversaries, and sometimes fraudulently and insidiously overwhelmed by lies, cavils, and calumny. While a cause is unheard, it is violence to pass sanguinary sentences against it; it is fraud to charge it, contrary to its deserts, with sedition and mischief.

That no one may suppose we are unjust in thus complaining, you yourself, most illustrious Sovereign, can bear us witness with what lying calumnies it is daily traduced in your presence, as aiming at nothing else than to wrest the scepters of kings out of their hands, to overturn all tribunals and seats of justice, to subvert all order and government, to disturb the peace and quiet of society, to abolish all laws, destroy the distinctions of rank and property, and, in short, turn all things upside down. And yet, that which you hear is but the smallest portion of what is said; for among the common people are disseminated certain horrible insinuations—insinuations which, if well founded, would justify the whole world in condemning the doctrine with its authors to a thousand fires and gibbets. Who can wonder that the popular hatred is inflamed against it, when credit is given to those most iniquitous accusations? See, why all ranks unite with one accord in condemning our persons and our doctrine!

Carried away by this feeling, those who sit in judgment merely give utterance to the prejudices which they have imbibed at home, and think they have duly performed their part if they do not order punishment to be inflicted on any one until convicted, either on his own confession, or on legal evidence. But of what crime convicted? "Of that condemned doctrine," is the answer. But with what justice condemned? The very essence of the defense was, not to abjure the doctrine itself, but to maintain its truth. On this subject, however, not a whisper is allowed!

Justice, then, most invincible Sovereign, entitles me to demand that you will undertake a thorough investigation of this cause, which has hitherto been tossed about in any kind of way, and handled in the most irregular manner, without any order of law, and with passionate heat rather than judicial gravity.

Let it not be imagined that I am here framing my own private defense, with the view of obtaining a safe return to my native land. Though I cherish towards it the feelings which become me as a man, still, as matters now are, I can be absent from it without regret. The cause which I plead is the common cause of all the godly, and therefore the very cause of Christ—a cause which, throughout your realm, now lies, as it were, in despair, torn and trampled upon in all kinds of ways, and that more through the tyranny of certain Pharisees than any sanction from yourself. But it matters not to inquire how the thing is done; the fact that it is done cannot be denied. For so far have the wicked prevailed, that the truth of Christ, if not utterly routed and dispersed, lurks as if it were ignobly buried; while the poor Church, either wasted by cruel slaughter or driven into exile, or intimidated and terror-struck, scarcely ventures to breathe. Still her enemies press on with their wonted rage and fury over the ruins which they have made, strenuously assaulting the wall, which is already giving way. Meanwhile, no man comes forth to offer his protection against such furies. Any who would be thought most favorable to the truth, merely

talk of pardoning the error and imprudence of ignorant men. For so those modest personages speak; giving the name of error and imprudence to that which they know to be the infallible truth of God, and of ignorant men to those whose intellect they see that Christ has not despised, seeing he has deigned to entrust them with the mysteries of his heavenly wisdom. Thus all are ashamed of the Gospel.

Your duty, most serene Prince, is not to shut either your ears or mind against a cause involving such mighty interests as these: how the glory of God is to be maintained on the earth inviolate, how the truth of God is to preserve its dignity, how the kingdom of Christ is to continue amongst us compact and secure. The cause is worthy of your ear, worthy of your investigation, worthy of your throne.

The characteristic of a true sovereign is, to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God. He who does not make his reign subservient to the divine glory, acts the part not of a king, but a robber. He, moreover, deceives himself who anticipates long prosperity to any kingdom which is not ruled by the scepter of God, that is, by his divine word. For the heavenly oracle is infallible which has declared, that “where there is no vision the people perish” (Prov. 29:18).

Let not a contemptuous idea of our insignificance dissuade you from the investigation of this cause. We, indeed, are perfectly conscious how poor and abject we are: in the presence of God we are miserable sinners, and in the sight of men most despised—we are (if you will) the mere dregs and offscourings of the world, or worse, if worse can be named: so that before God there remains nothing of which we can glory save only his mercy, by which, without any merit of our own, we are admitted to the hope of eternal salvation: and before men not even this much remains, since we can glory only in our infirmity, a thing which, in the estimation of men, it is the greatest ignominy even tacitly to confess. But our doctrine must stand sublime above all the glory of the world, and invincible by all its power, because it is not

SUMMARY

The First Book treats of the knowledge of God the Creator. But as it is in the creation of man that the divine perfections are best displayed, so man also is made the subject of discourse. Thus the whole book divides itself into two principal heads—the former relating to the knowledge of God, and the latter to the knowledge of man. In the first chapter, these are considered jointly; and in each of the following chapters, separately: occasionally, however, intermingled with other matters which refer to one or other of the heads; e.g., the discussions concerning Scripture and images, falling under the former head, and the other three concerning the creation of the world, the holy angels and devils, falling under the latter. The last point discussed—viz. the method of the divine government, relates to both. With regard to the former head—viz. the knowledge of God, it is shown, in the first place, what the kind of knowledge is which God requires, Chap. 2. And, in the second place (Chap. 3-9), where this knowledge must be sought, namely, not in man; because, although naturally implanted in the human mind, it is stifled, partly by ignorance, partly by evil intent, Chap. 3 and 4; not in the frame of the world: because, although it shines most clearly there, we are so stupid that these manifestations, however perspicuous, pass away without any beneficial result, Chap. 5; but in Scripture (Chap. 6), which is treated of, Chap. 7-9. In the

third place, it is shown what the character of God is, Chap. 10. In the fourth place, how impious it is to give a visible form to God (here images, the worship of them, and its origin, are considered), Chap. 11. In the fifth place, it is shown that God is to be solely and wholly worshiped, Chap. 12. Lastly, Chap. 13 treats of the unity of the divine essence, and the distinction of three persons.

With regard to the latter head—viz. the knowledge of man, first, Chap. 14 treats of the creation of the world, and of good and bad angels (these all having reference to man). And then Chap. 15, taking up the subject of man himself, examines his nature and his powers.

The better to illustrate the nature both of God and man, the three remaining Chapters—viz. 16-18, proceed to treat of the general government of the world, and particularly of human actions, in opposition to fortune and fate, explaining both the doctrine and its use. In conclusion, it is shown, that though God employs the instrumentality of the wicked, he is pure from sin and from taint of every kind.

CHAPTER 1

The Knowledge of God and of ourselves mutually connected.
Nature of the Connection.

Outline:

1. The sum of true wisdom—viz. the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Effects of the latter.
2. Effects of the knowledge of God, in humbling our pride, unveiling our hypocrisy, demonstrating the absolute perfections of God, and our own utter helplessness.
3. Effects of the knowledge of God illustrated by the examples, 1. of holy patriarchs; 2. of holy angels; 3. of the sun and moon.

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone. In the

second place, those blessings which unceasingly distill to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain. Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty. In particular, the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards; not only that while hungry and famishing we may thence ask what we want, but being aroused by fear may learn humility. For as there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stripped of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties every man, being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God. Thus, our feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short, depravity and corruption, reminds us (see Calvin on John 4:10), that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, exuberant goodness. We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves. For what man is not disposed to rest in himself? Who, in fact, does not thus rest, so long as he is unknown to himself; that is, so long as he is contented with his own endowments, and unconscious or unmindful of his misery? Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.

2. On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. For (such is our innate pride) we always seem to ourselves just, and upright, and wise, and holy, until we are convinced, by clear evidence, of our injustice, vileness, folly, and impurity. Convinced, however, we are not, if we look to ourselves only, and not to the Lord also —He being the only standard by the application of which this conviction can be produced. For, since we are all naturally prone to hypocrisy, any empty

semblance of righteousness is quite enough to satisfy us instead of righteousness itself. And since nothing appears within us or around us that is not tainted with very great impurity, so long as we keep our mind within the confines of human pollution, anything which is in some small degree less defiled delights us as if it were most pure just as an eye, to which nothing but black had been previously presented, deems an object of a whitish, or even of a brownish hue, to be perfectly white. Nay, the bodily sense may furnish a still stronger illustration of the extent to which we are deluded in estimating the powers of the mind. If, at mid-day, we either look down to the ground, or on the surrounding objects which lie open to our view, we think ourselves endowed with a very strong and piercing eyesight; but when we look up to the sun, and gaze at it unveiled, the sight which did excellently well for the earth is instantly so dazzled and confounded by the refulgence, as to oblige us to confess that our acuteness in discerning terrestrial objects is mere dimness when applied to the sun. Thus too, it happens in estimating our spiritual qualities. So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness will become polluted with the greatest iniquity; what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom will disgust by its extreme folly; and what presented the appearance of virtuous energy will be condemned as the most miserable impotence. So far are those qualities in us, which seem most perfect, from corresponding to the divine purity.

3. Hence that dread and amazement with which as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. When we see those who previously stood

firm and secure so quaking with terror, that the fear of death takes hold of them, nay, they are, in a manner, swallowed up and annihilated, the inference to be drawn is that men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God. Frequent examples of this consternation occur both in the Book of Judges and the Prophetical Writings; so much so, that it was a common expression among the people of God, "We shall die, for we have seen the Lord." Hence the Book of Job, also, in humbling men under a conviction of their folly, feebleness, and pollution, always derives its chief argument from descriptions of the Divine wisdom, virtue, and purity. Nor without cause: for we see Abraham the readier to acknowledge himself but dust and ashes the nearer he approaches to behold the glory of the Lord, and Elijah unable to wait with unveiled face for His approach; so dreadful is the sight. And what can man do, man who is but rottenness and a worm, when even the Cherubim themselves must veil their faces in very terror? To this, undoubtedly, the Prophet Isaiah refers, when he says (Isa. 24:23), "The moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the Lord of Hosts shall reign;" i.e., when he shall exhibit his refulgence, and give a nearer view of it, the brightest objects will, in comparison, be covered with darkness.

But though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie, due arrangement requires that we treat of the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter.

Study Guide Questions

Section 1

1. In what sense can we say that Calvin's epistemology has dual starting points?
2. Does Calvin argue for God's existence, or does he assume it?
3. Would Calvin agree that in order to know God, a man must know himself as knowing?

4. Would Calvin agree that this means a man should start his epistemological journey by trying to come to a knowledge of himself?
5. What is the motive a man should have in turning from knowledge of himself to knowing God?

Section 2

1. What does knowledge of God reveal to a man?
2. What is the sole standard of all judgment of man?
3. Why is man easily satisfied with counterfeit righteousness?
4. What is the relation between that which is less vile and that which is most pure?
5. What is Calvin's view of autonomous ethics?
6. What will a vision of God do to our view of the study of philosophy?

Section 3

1. How does Scripture commonly represent saints who have felt the presence of God?
2. What is necessary before a man rightly understands his own lowly state?
3. What powerful argument overwhelms men?
4. Although the knowledge of God and self are intertwined, what does right teaching require us to discuss first?
5. What can we do in our corporate worship to cultivate a right view of God?

ANSWERS TO STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France

- 1. What was Calvin's intention in writing the first edition of the *Institutes*?**

To convey the rudiments of the faith to those who had a zeal for religion, that they might come to true godliness.

- 2. What made it necessary to expand the work so that it also became a defense to the king on behalf of the Protestants?**

The fury of certain wicked persons. Calvin thought their slanders made it necessary to kill two birds with one stone—instruct believers and present a confession of faith to the king.

- 3. If a mere accusation is all that is necessary to convict someone of wrong-doing, then what is necessarily threatened with extinction?**

No innocence remains for any man.

- 4. What was the central slander directed against the Protestants?**

That they were politically subversive and wanted to turn everything upside down.

- 5. If all the slanders were in fact true, what does Calvin allow to be just?**

That the doctrine and its authors were worthy of a thousand fires and crosses.

6. What is Calvin's attitude toward France, his native land?

He says he has as much natural affection as becomes him.

7. Since it was not the king's idea, the persecution of the Protestants was the result of tyranny from what kind of individual?

It was more through the tyranny of certain Pharisees.

8. What, according to Calvin, constitutes true kingship?

The recognition that one is a minister of God in governing His kingdom.

9. What were Calvin's adversaries unable to bear the thought of?

They cannot bear to admit weakness.

10. The persecutors insisted on maintaining at least one of two things. What were they?

To keep their rule intact and their bellies full.

11. How does Calvin respond to the charge that the teaching of the Protestants is a novelty?

He says that the teaching of God's word is no novelty.

12. If it is new, in what way is it new?

It is new to them.

13. In response to the charge that this teaching is uncertain or doubtful, how does Calvin turn the tables?

By pointing out that this is a pattern in Scripture (Isa. 1:3), and by showing that they were not prepared to die for the things they claimed to be certain about.

14. In what way did miracles confirm the Protestant teaching? In what way not?

Miracles are the seal of the gospel. How could it be undermining miracles to preach the gospel? Contemporary miracles were unnecessary.

15. How did Calvin respond to the miracles that were purported to have established the teaching of Rome?

The same way Augustine answered the Donatists. The Bible warns of false teachers working miracles.

- 16. If the contest between the forces of Reformation and those opposed to it was to be decided through an appeal to the church fathers alone, which way would it go?**

The tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would be with the Reformers.

- 17. Were the church fathers without fault in what they taught? And what did the Roman church do with those faults? What illustration does Calvin use to portray this?**

No, they were not without fault. But Calvin says the Roman church exalts the faults of the fathers and ignores the virtues. They gather dung amid gold.

- 18. Does Calvin sidestep the teaching of the fathers, or does he cite them to support his teaching?**

He cites a number of them in support.

- 19. If the fathers were alive in Calvin's day, what is the last thing they would suppose the "sophists" of Rome were discussing?**

The last thing they would suppose as the subject of discussion would be God. Their brawling arts were not theology, Calvin says.

- 20. Why does Calvin not wish to be bound by custom?**

To force him to submit to custom would be to treat him most unjustly.

- 21. What is the alternative to completely despairing of human affairs?**

To grapple with the great evils or forcibly quell them.

- 22. What does the Lord do when many ages agree on a particular impiety?**

Truth is not determined by majority vote. Scripture teaches what the end is for those who sin with the multitude.

- 23. According to Calvin, upon what is the Church's existence based?**

The reign of Christ at the right hand of the Father.