

T.H.L. PARKER

OUTSTANDING  
CHRISTIAN  
THINKERS

JOHN  
CALVIN

CALVIN



  
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CALVIN

## OUTSTANDING CHRISTIAN THINKERS

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T. H. L. Parker

# CALVIN

## An Introduction to His Thought

T. H. L. Parker

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I intended only to give some elementary teaching by which anyone who had been touched by an interest in religion might be formed to true godliness. And I was especially diligent in this work for the sake of our own people of France. I saw very many of them hungering and thirsting for Christ but very few who were imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. That this is what I proposed the book itself bears witness by its simple and even rudimentary form of teaching.

John Calvin, *Institutio* (1536 edition)

My intention in this work has been so to prepare and train aspirants after sacred theology in reading the Divine Word that they may have an easy access into it and then proceed in it without stumbling. For I think I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts and arranged it in order that anyone who grasps it aright will have no difficulty in determining both what he ought especially to look for in Scripture and to what end he should refer everything contained in Scripture. Thus I have, as it were, paved the way . . .

John Calvin, *Institutio* (1539 edition)

In the first edition of this work of ours I did not in the least expect that success which, out of his infinite goodness, the Lord has given. Thus, for the most part I treated the subject summarily, as is usually done in small works. But when I realized that it was received by almost all godly men with a favor for which I never would have ventured to wish, much less to hope, I deeply felt that I was much more favored than I deserved. Consequently I thought that I should be showing extreme ingratitude not to try at least, to the best of my slender ability, to respond to this warm appreciation for me, an appreciation that demanded my further diligence. Not only did I attempt this in the second edition, but each time the work has been reprinted since then, it has been enriched with some additions. Although I did not regret the labor spent, I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth. Now I trust that I have provided something that all of you will approve.

John Calvin, *Institutio* (1559 edition)

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# Preface

In Calvin's *Institutio* is concentrated and ordered the teaching found throughout his sermons and commentaries, his occasional pieces and letters. Although I cannot agree with those who have called him 'a man of one book', yet I freely accept that the *Institutio* comprehends the whole of his thought. Here we may learn why he seceded from Rome, why he strove to reform the Church, and what was the shape of his reforms. We may perceive in this mirror of his mind his view of the world and its history, his understanding of contemporary Europe, the dangers threatening it, his fears for its future. Above all we can hear a declaration of faith, direct and simple save where controversy forces him into involved debate.

If, therefore, we wish to describe Calvin in the context of outstanding Christian thinkers we cannot do better than expound the *Institutio*, assured that its comprehensiveness will be reflected, even in miniature, in our exposition. More, I have tried not only to reflect the comprehensiveness but also to be guided in his every chapter and every paragraph by Calvin's own expressed intentions (see pp. 9–10). This may seem too obvious a method to mention, but I have yet to find any previous expositor of Calvin's thought as a whole who has adopted it as his deliberate programme.

Suggestions for further reading will be given in the notes. For the multitudinous literature on Calvin bibliographies should be consulted: W. Niesel, *Calvin-Bibliographie 1901–1959* (Munich, 1961); D. Kempff, *A Bibliography of Calviniana 1959–1974* (Leiden, 1975); and P. De Klerk's annual bibliography in *Calvin Theological Journal*.

Quotations from the *Institutio* will be given in the following form: the Book number (in roman capitals) followed by the chapter number (in roman lower case) followed by the paragraph number (in arabic numerals); then the *Opera Selecta* reference, with the volume in roman capitals followed by the page number in arabic and the line numbers above. Thus xvi.1, 187<sup>19-21</sup>, means in this case Book I, chapter xvi, paragraph 1, to be found in lines 19–21 of p. 187 of, in this case, Vol. I of *Opera Selecta*. (The Book number and the *Opera Selecta* volume are given only at the beginning of each Book or in cross-references.)

*Opera Selecta* is abbreviated as OS; *Calvini Opera* (in *Corpus Reformatorum*) as CO.

I should like to thank Brian Davies, OP, first for encouraging me to write and then for the many improvements he has suggested. I am grateful also to the publishers for all the helpfulness and patience they have shown.

T.H.L. Parker  
Cambridge

# Introduction

## 1 CALVIN'S WRITINGS

Calvin was in the second wave of Reformers. By the time he was born (1509) in north-eastern France, Luther was a grown man, Erasmus already laying out new paths in New Testament studies. He was still a schoolboy when Luther issued his challenge of the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517. The battle lines were being drawn up while he was an arts student in the University of Paris. Rome, Wittenberg, and Zürich had taken up their settled positions before he himself began to worry about the problems raised; after many doubts and hesitations, he sided with Luther.<sup>1</sup>

The date of this conversion is disputed. Perhaps it was while he was studying law at Orléans and Bourges; not impossibly even earlier in his Paris days. What is certain is that when he had become a tutor in one of the Paris colleges he was mixing in reformist circles and was soon to be implicated in the composition of a university rectorial address adjudged heretical by the Faculty of Theology. After some months in hiding he was forced to leave France. He spent a year in Basel, during which he completed and published (1536) the first edition of his *Christianae Religionis Institutio*, 'The Principles of the Christian Religion'. A brief spell in Italy as a secretary to the Duchess of Ferrara was followed by the very different career of biblical lecturer and pastor in the newly reformed Geneva. This was to be his home for the rest of his life, apart from a period (1538–41) as pastor of the French Church in Strasbourg.

He revised and greatly enlarged the *Institutio* for an edition of 1539 and translated it into French in 1541. This second recension held its place for eighteen years, with some changes and refinements in 1543 and 1550. It was again totally rearranged and augmented for the definitive edition, appearing in 1559 in the form in which we now know it.

His ministry in Geneva provided the impetus for most of his other literary work. In the 59 quarto double-columned volumes of his *opera omnia* in *Corpus Reformatorum*, the *Institutio* in its several recensions occupies only four. A further five or six suffice for occasional writings and another eleven for correspondence. Of the rest, no fewer than 35 volumes are needed to accommodate his biblical works. These are the commentaries, probably based on lectures, on all the New Testament except 2 and 3 John and Revelation, and on the Pentateuch, Joshua, Psalms and Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> To these must be added verbatim transcripts of his lectures on all the Prophets and verbatim transcripts of sermons in which he preached verse by verse through Genesis, Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, Job, nearly all the Prophets, some Psalms, part of a harmony of the Gospels, Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews.<sup>3</sup>

We must, for reasons of space, confine ourselves in this book to the exposition of one work, the *Institutio*. But we must not forget that its author is this man of diverse parts – the dogmatic theologian, the biblical scholar, the pastor, the ecclesiastical reformer – who has exercised a wide influence in the Church, in political and social economy, and in literature.

## 2 THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

The *Institutio* was written in and for the sixteenth century. It was directed to sixteenth-century readers with sixteenth-century patterns of thought. Thus it was given its distinctive ethos by the need to address contemporary institutions and intellectual and moral movements.

First, the Rome from which the Reformers seceded, Rome before and newly through the Council of Trent. 'Rome' is a broad concept. There is no comprehensive standpoint which would have been accepted both by the obscurantists who could call the Greek New Testament a heretical book and also by those who entered into

sensible dialogue with the Reformers. A common allegiance to the institution of the Papacy and to general tenets bonded together the disparate movements of Thomists, Augustinians, Occamists, Scotists and, soon, Jesuits. Calvin's polemic does not always cover them all at the same time. His customary terms are 'Papists' (generally the contemporary Romanists), 'Scholastics' and 'Sophists', the first of which refers to mediaeval theologians, the latter to both mediaeval and contemporary. 'Sorbonnists' denotes the obscurantist Paris Faculty.

With the schoolmen he makes a distinction between the better, of an earlier period, and the progressively degenerate of the later. The Church fathers (with whom we may include Bernard of Clairvaux) are in an altogether different class.<sup>4</sup> Despite some weaknesses and aberrations they are usually 'those holy men' on whom Calvin will rely for confirmation, and to whom he will direct the reader as saying this or that better than he could say it himself. Most frequently quoted is Augustine, usually with approval. Others will appear at special places – Hilary of Poitiers on Christology, or Cyprian on the Church, for example.

Where to place the heart of the Reformers' dissent from Rome is far from easy. Possibly it was their insistence on the supremacy of grace over sin, although this itself may suggest different concepts of the work of the Mediator. Calvin himself saw it in different attitudes to Scripture. If the Romanists would agree with us on 'Scripture alone' he said, all the other questions would speedily be settled.

Secondly, there were the Anabaptists, whom Calvin calls sometimes by that name, sometimes 'fanatics', sometimes 'enthusiasts', sometimes 'libertines'.<sup>5</sup> Here again there was not one well-defined body but a large number of anti-Roman, anti-Establishment groups with differing, often opposed, views. At the one extreme the more conservative Anabaptists were not far removed from left-wing Reformers, apart from their rebaptizing and refusal to baptize infants. At the other extreme stood the anarchists, the exponents of free love, and the Trinitarian heretics. We shall meet with most of them on our journey.

Thirdly, the humanists. In this term are included not simply those who knew Greek and Hebrew, who respected the civilization of Greece and Rome, who cultivated an Augustan style in their own writing and who took an informed interest in the scientific discoveries that were beginning to be made. The typical Renaissance humanist went further than this. As P. O. Kristeller put it, 'the core

and center of Renaissance humanism' is 'the emphasis on the Greek and Latin classics as the chief subjects of study and as unrivalled models of imitation in writing and in thinking and even in actual conduct'.<sup>6</sup>

Caution must be used when considering Calvin's relation to humanism.<sup>7</sup> Taking Kristeller's definition, did Calvin regard the classics as 'the chief subjects' of his study? If so, was he self-deceived in claiming (as he often did) the Bible as his chief subject? Again, did he regard the classics as 'unrivalled models of imitation . . . in thinking and even in actual conduct'? If so, why does he give the primacy to the Law and the Gospel? It would be better if those who are so eager to make Calvin a humanist *tout court* were to consider all the evidence of his career and writings, and at least to admit a few qualifications. This much, however, may safely be said. He had a deep affection for, and a wide knowledge of, the classical authors; he wrote good Augustan prose; he adopted the rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian; he used various classical philosophies like Stoicism and Platonism; finally, he, like any other man, was not so in control of all his thinking as always to eradicate all extra-biblical ideas from his mind, even though his aim avowedly was to be so true to Scripture as not to swerve 'a nail's breadth' from its teaching.

Lastly, the extreme humanists, especially the free-thinkers in Paris – Rabelais, Dolet, des Périers and the other Epicurean devotees of a neo-paganism. This movement filled Calvin with alarm as the most dangerous of all threats to European society. When, as so often, in the *Institutio* we come upon attacks on the Epicureans it is usually of this group that we should think.

### 3 THE INTERPRETATION OF THE *INSTITUTIO*

The *Institutio* developed from six chapters in 1536 through the seventeen of 1539 and the 21 of 1543–50 to the four Books of 1559. Our task now is to describe the character of these recensions and thus to learn how the work should be interpreted.

The first edition was framed on the lines of traditional catechisms or primers, which had aimed at teaching young Christians the elements of the Christian Faith. They commonly consisted of instruction on the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. To these was added in the Reformation period

teaching on the Sacraments. The 1536 *Institutio*, following this pattern, contained chapters on the Law, the Faith, and Prayer (with expositions on the Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer respectively), as well as chapters on the Sacraments and a threefold final chapter on Christian liberty, the authority of the Church and political authority.

The form reflected Calvin's intention in writing the book. In the Letter to the King of France which prefaced this edition (and was retained in all subsequent editions) he explained his purpose. At the outset, he said, he had not planned an *apologia* for Church reform: 'I intended only to give some elementary teaching by which anyone who had been touched by an interest in religion might be formed to true godliness. And I was especially diligent in this work for the sake of our own people of France. I saw very many of them hungering and thirsting for Christ but very few who were imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. That this is what I proposed the book itself bears witness by its simple and even rudimentary form of teaching' (OS I.21). It was only when the book was completed or nearing completion that Calvin saw that the work would also serve as an explanation to the King and his advisers of the real beliefs of the French Reformers, who were far from being, as they were now represented, Anabaptists and heretics. The apologetic character of the book was therefore incidental; its essential character was catechetical, to give elementary teaching to those who had begun to be interested in the Faith, to those who were 'hungering and thirsting for Christ'.

Within a little while Calvin became dissatisfied with his *Institutio* and set out to revise it. The new edition was three times the length of the first. Moreover, the catechetical form had been dropped in favour of a systematic arrangement of the main doctrines (as Calvin saw them) of Holy Scripture. These are, following his chapters: The knowledge of God / The knowledge of man and free-will / The Law (with an exposition of the Decalogue) / The Faith (with an exposition of the Apostles' Creed) / Penitence / Justification by faith and the merits of works / The likeness and differences between the Old and New Testaments / Predestination and God's Providence / Prayer (with an exposition of the Lord's Prayer) / The Sacraments / Baptism / The Lord's Supper / Christian liberty / The authority of the Church / Political authority / The five 'falsely-named' sacraments / The life of a Christian man.

In 1543 were added chapters on Vows and on Human traditions; and to the chapter on the Faith three others in which the Creed was

expounded more thoroughly. There is also some rearrangement of the order of chapters. The final form of this recension (1550) tidied up several mistakes, enlarged two or three chapters, and gave added clarity to the paragraphs by numbering them.

A prefatory address to the reader in 1539 and a summary of the contents in 1543 explain why the revision had been made and in what the character of this group of editions consists. As he discloses his purpose we see that a change has taken place in the readership for which the book was chiefly intended, and correspondingly a change in the form of the book itself: 'My intention in this work has been so to prepare and train aspirants after sacred theology [i.e., theological students] in reading the Divine Word that they may have an easy access into it and then proceed in it without stumbling' (CO 1, 255<sup>6</sup>). 'Those who have been touched by an interest in religion' and 'those who are hungering and thirsting for Christ' are certainly not excluded from the number of 'aspirants after sacred theology'; but the new category implies a change of tone from helping on babes in the Faith to instructing the more mature. The first edition did not here mention Holy Scripture; no doubt it was taken for granted. But now Scripture is put in the foreground. The 1539–50 *Institutio*, to use Calvin's terms of rhetoric, opens the door into the reading and understanding of Scripture and thereafter smooths the path of further understanding.

Concurrently with the revising of the *Institutio* was being written the first-fruits of the New Testament commentaries, *Romans*. It was his grappling with the problem of the form of his commentary that determined also the form of the revised *Institutio*. New Testament exposition had traditionally followed one of the two ways of exegesis: either of individual words and phrases or interpretation of the general meaning of passages. The mediaeval expositor, in his written commentaries and even more in his lectures, had concentrated on the former. Fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Renaissance writers, however, preferred to give a more general interpretation. In particular it was seen that Aristotle and, for the Latins, Cicero had advocated the method by which the more important subjects in a passage were extracted and written up as separate articles. These more important subjects were called by Aristotle 'topics' or 'places' (*topoi*; in Cicero *loci*). Those which were gathered out of a whole book or the complete Bible and, therefore, were common to the whole were called 'common places' (*loci communes*).<sup>8</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Melanchthon was the first to apply this method to the New Testament and he was quickly followed by others, notably, for our present argument, by Martin Bucer. When Calvin embarked on his career as New Testament commentator he had, therefore, to choose between the methods. He knew Melanchthon's work and also Bucer's commentary on Romans, which came out in the same month as the 1536 *Institutio*. In the event neither Melanchthon nor Bucer won his complete approval. Melanchthon's commentary largely neglected detailed exegesis in favour of theological exposition. Bucer supplied abundant exegesis as well as very long doctrinal treatises (*loci communes*), all of which, put together within one volume, made the work so lengthy as to be virtually unreadable. In one respect, however, they showed Calvin the way forward. It would be possible to write a commentary in the time-honoured way of straight exposition with its attendant exegesis, and to assemble the *loci communes* in a separate book as Melanchthon had done with his *Loci communes rerum theologicarum* (1521). This separate book became the second edition of the *Institutio*.

We return to the address to the reader:

My intention in this work has been so to prepare and train aspirants after sacred theology in reading the Divine Word that they may have an easy access into it and then proceed in it without stumbling. For I think I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts and arranged it in order that anyone who grasps it aright will have no difficulty in determining both what he ought especially to look for in Scripture and to what end he should refer everything contained in Scripture. Thus I have, as it were, paved the way; and if in the future I publish any commentaries on Scripture I shall always condense them and keep them short, for I shall have no need to undertake lengthy doctrinal discussions or digress into *loci communes*. In this way the godly reader will be spared much trouble and tedium, provided he approaches [the commentaries] fore-armed with a knowledge of the present work as a necessary instrument. But because my commentary on the Epistle to the Romans will furnish an example of this intention, I prefer to let it speak for itself rather than forecast it by my words now. (CO 1, 255/6)

This recension of the *Institutio*, therefore, is tied firmly not only to Scripture but also to the author's commentaries on Scripture. Had Calvin been Bucer, most of the material in the 1539 *Institutio* would

now be found scattered throughout his commentary on Romans. If the first edition was the 'catechetical' *Institutio*, the second might be called the 'topical' *Institutio*, the *Institutio* of the *topoi*, the *loci communes*. Nevertheless, he has taken the care to arrange the *loci* in an order that should correspond to the Faith of Scripture. He can even speak of this aggregation as constituting a *summa religionis*, a comprehensive statement of the Christian religion.

The four chapters of 1539–50 expounding the Apostles' Creed now dictate the shape of the whole work. Calvin divided the Creed into four parts, not the usual three:

- (1) I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;
- (2) I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
- (3) I believe in the Holy Spirit;
- (4) I believe the holy catholic Church.

Under these four heads the *loci communes* of the earlier version are rearranged, often rewritten, often added to, giving us at last four Books:

Book I: On the Knowledge of God the Creator.

Book II: On the Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, which was revealed first to the Fathers under the Law and then also to us in the Gospel.

Book III: On the Way the Grace of Christ is to be received; what Fruits come to us from it and what Effects follow.

Book IV: On the external Means or Helps by which God invites us into the Society of Christ and keeps us in it.

This edition of the *Institutio* is not, however, a direct exposition of the Creed. Only rarely (as Book II, ch. xvi) does it become this. Nor are there chapters devoted specially to its exposition, like ch. iv in 1539, v–viii in 1543. But even when the Creed is not visible, we should bear it in mind as a character waiting in the wings. What is more, the order of topics in the Creed is not strictly kept. 'The forgiveness of sins' comes in Book III, ch. xiv, and 'the resurrection of the body' in ch. xxv of that Book. Yet the place of the Creed in the *Institutio* is not purely formal. It determines the understanding and interpretation of the work. We may therefore complete our labelling of the recensions by calling this the 'credal' *Institutio*.

In the description of the shape of the *Institutio* we have also been given the clues to its character. The doctrines which go to make up the work are no longer a set of *loci communes* selected and

arranged by a private theologian. They now claim for themselves the reflected authority of the oldest working Creed in Christendom, the Creed assented to by the Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, the Reformed and the Church of England. It should go without saying that this in no way implies a move away from Scripture towards 'Church tradition'. Calvin's position on the authority of Scripture remained the same, as is evidenced by the fact that the rest of the address to the reader is left unchanged from 1539. But it does suggest that by the new form of the *Institutio* Calvin is claiming that its teaching is an authentic statement of the Faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. More than that, however (and this is surely Calvin's chief reason for the manner of the revision), the Trinitarian form accorded more clearly and strongly with the character of his theology, which had been Trinitarian from the beginning. The very form is used to declare the unity and the threefoldness of the Godhead. As the first three Books correspond to the credal witness to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so, but less obviously, the titles of these Books testify to the unity by speaking only of 'God' and not of 'Father', 'Son', or 'Holy Spirit'.

The interpretation of the *Institutio*, then, must be governed by its form. This may be a literary truism, but the misunderstandings of the work and, therefore, of Calvin's theology have more often than not been accompanied by a wrenching of its form into one that fitted the misinterpretation. A blatant example was the thesis that Calvin was mistaken in casting the *Institutio* in four Books, since it should rather be divided into two, on the knowledge of God the Creator and on the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

But Calvin goes out of his way to make everything plain and straightforward for his readers. First, he has arranged the work in four Books. We accept the fact and let it guide our thinking. Each Book is given a precise title – that is, one which accurately declares its contents. Each Book is divided into chapters which are also clearly labelled. Each chapter is divided into paragraphs, connected and separated by numbering. Now, all the titles are what we may call Calvin's stage-directions, informing us of the 'location' and of the 'characters' we shall hear speaking. There is a letter from Edwyn Bevan to Robert Bridges (anent the agèd Poet Laureate's wrestling with *The Testament of Beauty*) which is relevant here: 'It was the practice of the ancients in long poems to give these indications regularly. They began by stating the subject of the poem