

Calvin's 1536 Institutes: The Church's Book
by
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It is a privilege and pleasure to be here this evening and especially to have the opportunity to say a few words about one of the great theologian-pastors of the Christian church. The remarkableness of the person is evident in the book for which we celebrate the 450th birthday this year. John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion has been studied repeatedly, particularly in the edition of 1559. On this anniversary I cannot add anything new to the discussion of the Institutes of 1536, but I should like to bring together a few of the many things one could say in hopes that the juxtaposition of well-known and less-known facts may highlight afresh important features of this enduring text.

It is often said that Calvin is very consistent, and he is. This does not mean, however, that he did not learn and mature, did not develop new facets of his thought.¹ I would like to suggest some of the rather distinctive characteristics of the 1536 Institutes. Please note the qualification; in emphasizing discontinuity, the continuity must not be forgotten.

I

As is well known, Calvin had two principal purposes² in mind when he wrote and published the first edition of the Institutes.² Even as a recent convert himself, Calvin had been besieged with pleas for instruction. Thus he had begun the book as a kind of catechism for the young French church, the new evangelicals who needed a clear statement of their faith.

When I first set my hand to this work . . . my purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labor especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I saw to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; very few who had been imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching.³

In the tense context of 1535, when Anabaptists at Muenster were giving a bad name to all who broke with Rome, Calvin realized that his fellow believers needed also to be clearly distinguished from the radicals. Thus the young scholar addressed his work to the French king, Francis I, as an apologia for the evangelical integrity and political orderliness of persecuted French Protestants.

. . . nothing was farther from my mind, most glorious King, than to write something which might be offered to your Majesty. . . . But I perceived that the fury of certain

wicked persons has prevailed so far in your realm that there is no place in it for sound doctrine. Consequently, it seemed to me that I should be doing something worthwhile if I both gave instruction to those I had undertaken to instruct and made confession before you with the same work. From this you may learn the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage, who today disturb your realm with fire and sword. And indeed I shall not fear to confess that I have here embraced almost the sum of that very doctrine which they shout must be punished by prison, exile, proscription, and fire, and be exterminated on land and sea. Indeed, I know with what horrible reports they have filled your ears and mind, to render our cause as hateful as possible to you. But, as fits your clemency, you ought to weigh the fact that if it is enough merely to make accusations, then no innocence will remain either in words or deeds.

Julius Koestlin has pointed out that in 1536 the first three chapters, on law, creed, and prayer, are the primary catechetical portion of the Institutes and perhaps the more important half of the book. (In fact, in later editions of the Institutes, the credal emphasis expands until in 1559 it provides the formal structure of the whole work.) The last three chapters of the first edition, especially five and six, are more polemical and more clearly apologetic--not in the modern sense of a rational prolegomenon to belief but as a confident statement of the true faith, distinguishing it from all perversions.⁵ Thus the two purposes, catechetical and apologetic, are also reflected in the shape of the book.

In time the audience for the catechesis shifted slightly. The Institutes were still intended to open the scriptures to the people of God, but the role of the textbook for theologian-pastors came gradually to outweigh the purpose of educating simple layfolk. This was not perhaps deliberate; Calvin in fact translated later editions into French for the literate laity. However, the enormous growth of the final edition, the one Calvin himself preferred, suggests that the primary audience was students.⁶ The apologetic purpose, too, was never lost; the epistle to Francis I was retained throughout. As it became evident that the French kings would not listen, the emphasis on apologia receded. The 1536 Institutes was thus in some ways uniquely the book of the church--the lay church, the new believers. Less "systematic," more accessible to simple Christians than later editions, the 1536 Institutes was the confession of scattered, persecuted handfuls of Christians who had seen the faith in a new light and believed it was worth a very high price, even exile, imprisonment, or death.

II

On a lighter note, it is amusing to point out some forgotten "uncharacteristic" facts about the Institutes of 1536. The "Calvin legend" is ever with us; one can count on people automatically associating the words "Servetus" and "predestination" with Calvin. One interesting

point, which always surprises such people, is the fact that the word predestination does not appear in the first edition of the Institutes, and there is only a hint of the topic itself in the discussions of the church. Some (including the speaker) would say that this is perfectly appropriate, since election in Calvin should be understood as an implicate of faith, not a subject of speculation.

Another fascinating point, and one which has only recently been uncovered, is the treatment of women's roles in the Institutes, especially in 1536. It appears that those who have blithely quoted Calvin to deny ecclesiastical office or ordination to women will have to find another champion. Jane Dempsey Douglass' new book⁸ shows that the only reference to women's public roles in 1536 is in the context of the discussion of Christian freedom, in the part which deals with adiaphora. What Calvin says is even more interesting; he places Paul's injunction to women to keep silent in church among the indifferent things, the external polity of the church which can be changed as ideas of seemliness and edification change!⁹ In later editions Calvin calls women's silence a matter of order rather than decorum as in 1536, but he continues to regard this text as an example of adiaphora. (In fact, Calvin is apparently the only mainstream Protestant to classify 1 Cor. 14:34 this way, though his own practice was very traditional. Evidently decorum and order in the sixteenth-century did not stretch as far as they could in future generations.)

A well-known but very important characteristic of the Institutes which is most evident in the earliest editions is the rhetorical beauty and biting wit of Calvin's writing. One humorous example of the latter is a comment on the use of the good things of this life (which Calvin is supposed to have despised).

But . . . [indifferent things] . . . are more important than is commonly believed. For when consciences have once ensnared themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of. If a man begins to doubt whether he may use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, and napkins, he will afterward be uncertain also about hemp; and finally, doubt will even arise over tow. For he will turn over in his mind whether he can sup without napkins, or go without handkerchiefs. . . . If he boggles at sweet wine, he will not with clear conscience drink even flat wine, and finally he will not dare touch water if sweeter or cleaner than other water.¹⁰

III

When I re-examined the 1536 Institutes with the idea of noting its distinctive features, I remembered a curious question which I had never had time to investigate. In a passing comment in an article chiefly concerned with a comparison of Bucer's and Calvin's catechisms, Jacques Courvoisier makes the provocative claim that Calvin came to Strasbourg a "Lutheran" and, under the influence of Bucer, was transformed into a "Reformed" theologian.¹¹ Courvoisier bases this view on the fact that

It is in Strasbourg that Calvin develops his teaching on the church from a focus on the invisible to the clearly visible. An apt quotation from the German theologian Hundeshagen makes the point: "for Lutherans, the Church is a locus in systematic theology, while for the Reformed, it is systematics which is a locus in the Church."¹² As further evidence, Courvoisier highlights the oft-noted fact that in 1536 Calvin follows Luther in ordering his topics. Law comes first, then faith or creed, then prayer, and so forth. According to Courvoisier, this order is altered in later editions of the Institutes; from 1539 on, faith is shifted to precede law, a pattern already found in the Strasbourg catechisms of Capito and Bucer in the early 1530s.

To recast Courvoisier's thought, one might ask if this first Institutes, the book of the church, was also in fact much less a book about the church than any later edition. Is there a significant theological difference between the first and later editions of the Institutes? Certainly there is development.

However, Courvoisier's challenging assertions seem rather extreme. With regard to the ordering of the material, it seems likely that Luther and Calvin both were following a much older catechetical tradition. Further, an examination of the contents of the chapter on law suggests that Calvin already held the characteristically "Reformed" insistence on the third use, though this receives less prominence than in later editions. More importantly, the 1536 organization of the chapter entitled "On the Law" does not begin abruptly with law¹³ but in fact has strong similarities to the later overall organization of the Institutes. Calvin first sketches his characteristic schema of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, then treats briefly the image of God and the fall, Christ, grace, and justification by faith. Only then does the reformer turn to the decalog and conclude with a comment on the three uses of the law. The shift between the Institutes of 1536 and 1539 does not seem as clear as Courvoisier claims; the 1536 material is greatly expanded but not essentially altered.¹⁴

The quotation from Hundeshagen points up a fact which many have noted.¹⁵ In 1536 Calvin's teaching on the church is fundamentally a reaction to abuses; positive, practical ecclesiology expands most in 1543, after the Strasbourg sojourn. Two points should be noted, though. In 1536 Calvin was not seeking to organize the church but to purify and reform it. He was not concerned so much with polity as with doctrine and correcting abuses. When the Institutes became primarily a textbook for theologian-pastors, more practical discussion of ecclesiology was necessary. Secondly, despite the lack of practical application in 1536, the theology of the Institutes is clearly ecclesial in viewpoint from the beginning.¹⁶ It remains true, however, that the Institutes of 1536 is the book of lay Christians whose office was not ecclesiastical organization but witness to their faith.

IV

In concluding one might ask why we are focusing on the Institutes of 1536, if Calvin himself felt this had long been superseded. Most

simply, my own answer is that there is a special excitement in the birth of a child, no matter how much richer and more mature the adult may be. As a historian, I must also say that studying the various stages of the developing book has a particular fascination: from the promise of the bud through the full blooming of what is rightly regarded as the single greatest book of the Protestant Reformation. After the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came a long period of declining interest in Calvin. Then, some would say "unexpectedly," came the twentieth-century revival of Luther studies and of Calvin studies; with these, the interest in Calvin's Institutes flourishes again and even extends to the much-neglected exegetical works of the theologian-pastor. It is delightful to see here evidence of that fascination with our brilliant, faithful, prickly friend among the saints, John Calvin.

Notes

¹An older but excellent discussion of the development of the Institutes is Julius Koestlin, "Calvins Institutio nach Form und Inhalt, in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung," Theologische Studien und Kritiken, 1868, pp. 6-62, 410-486. See also John T. McNeill, "Introduction," Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. xxix-lxxi. (Hereafter: Institutes.)

²The most recent discussion specifically of the 1536 Institutes is the "Introduction" by Ford Lewis Battles in his English translation. John Calvin, Institution of the Christian Religion, trans. and annotated by F. L. Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), pp. v-lviii. (Hereafter: Institution.)

³Institution, p. 1.

⁴Institution, p. 1.

⁵Koestlin, op. cit., pp. 21, 23, 27.

⁶Institutes, "John Calvin to the Reader," p. 4.

⁷Cf. Paul Jacobs, Praedestination und Verantwortlichkeit bei Calvin (Kassel: Oncken, 1937), pp. 61-62.

⁸Jane Dempsey Douglass, Women, Freedom, and Calvin (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).

⁹Institution, pp. 281, 282: "Nor can Paul's requirement--that 'all things be done decently and in order'--be met unless order itself and decorum be established through the addition of observances that form, as it were, a bond of union. But in these observances one thing must be always guarded against. They are not to be considered necessary for salvation and thus bind consciences by scruples; nor are they to be associated with the worship of God, so that piety is lodged in them. . . . There are examples of [this] sort in Paul: that women should not teach

in church [I Cor. 14:14-34], that they should go out with heads covered [I Cor. 11:5ff]. And examples can be seen in the everyday habits of living, such as: that we pray with knees bent and head bare: . . ."

¹⁰Institution, p. 245.

¹¹Jacques Courvoisier, "Les catechismes de Geneve et de Strasbourg," Bulletin de la Society de l'histoire du protestantisme francais 84 (1935), pp. 107, 120.

¹²Courvoisier, op. cit., p. 120, citing Hundeshagen as quoted in D. Ritschl, Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus, vol. 3, p. 129.

¹³Koestlin, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

¹⁴Courvoisier, op. cit., p. 107, cites the parallel tables in Opera Calvini, vol. 1, pp. ii-lviii, but these do not fully support him.

¹⁵E.g., Koestlin, op. cit., p. 481.

¹⁶Alexandre Ganoczy, Le jeune Calvin: Genèse et évolution de sa vocation réformatrice (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1966), e.g., pp. 79, 239.