



Calvin, John.

The Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2 vols.

Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Today marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin and the theological world is buzzing in celebration. It is in recognition of this occasion that I here offer this homage to the *Institutes*. Let's face the facts, you just don't write a book review of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. For one, it's massive and I admittedly haven't read the entire thing; and the mere fact that it has stood the test of time for over 400 years (and has managed to remain relevant in the process!) is intimidating enough to make me realize my own limitations. For as much as I disagree with Calvin at times I still stand in awe of his theological and exegetical acumen.

Every generation throughout Christian history has certain theologians whose very names represent the period. The Ante-Nicene period brings to mind Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian. The Nicene and Post-Nicene period makes us think of Athanasius, Augustine, and the Cappadocians. And although the medieval period stretched a long span we almost instinctively think of Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas. For the Reformation period no name comes to mind faster than Calvin's (no, not even Luther!). And no work of Calvin's comes to mind faster than his *Institutes*. I was chatting with my buddy Esteban the other day as I was in the process of shifting some books around in my library. I asked him if he thought I should shelf the *Institutes* with my systematic theology books or with my books on Calvinism. He opted for the latter saying that he's never been able to think of the *Institutes* as *just* a systematic theology. I thought about that for a second and then quickly agreed!

The copy of the *Institutes* that I have is the 2006 WJK reprint of the 1960 Westminster Press edition edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles. This edition is part of WJK's fantastic The Library of Christian Classics series which contains modern English translations of important theological works from the patristic period up through the Reformation. The four books of the *Institutes* are housed in two beautifully bound hardcover volumes and span 1521 pages with an additional 213 pages of bibliographies and indices. A quick glance at the Scripture and author/source indices show just how rooted in Scripture Calvin was and also how conversant he was with the great theologians that came before him. It's really quite astonishing to think about how learned this man actually was, but then again, he didn't have TV or Xbox 360 to distract him! ;-)

My interest in Calvin lies mainly in his Trinitarian theology, of which there is plenty in the *Institutes*. In particular he presented his doctrine in response to various heretics, the most notable among them Michael Servetus. Calvin clearly saw the importance of defending the doctrine of the Trinity and thus continued in a long tradition of Trinitarian apologetics which laid the foundation for believers such as myself. Here's a lengthy excerpt from Book 1, chapter 13, sections 2-3 in which Calvin lays the groundwork for his presentation of the Trinity by first introducing the three persons and then defending the use of the extra-biblical terms "Trinity" and "Person":

But God also designates himself by another special mark to distinguish himself more precisely from idols. For he so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God. Again, lest anyone imagine that God is threefold, or think God's simple essence to be torn into three persons, we must here seek a short and easy definition to free us from all error.

But because some hatefully inveigh against the word "person," as if humanly devised, we ought first to see with what justice they do this. The apostle, calling the Son of God "the stamp of the Father's hypostasis" [Heb, 1:3], doubtless assigns some subsistence to the Father wherein he differs from the Son. For to consider hypostasis equivalent to *essence* (as certain interpreters have done, as if Christ, like wax imprinted with a seal, represented in himself the substance of the Father) would be not only uncouth but also absurd. For since the essence of God is simple and undivided, and he contains all in himself, without portion of derivation, but in integral perfection, the Son will be improperly, even foolishly, called his "stamp." But because the Father, although distinct in his proper nature, expresses

himself wholly in the Son, for a very good reason is it said that he has made his hypostasis visible in the latter. In close agreement with this are the words immediately following, that the Son is "the splendor of his glory" [Heb. 1:3, cf. Vg.]. Surely we infer from the apostle's words that the very hypostasis that shines forth in the Son is in the Father. From this we also easily ascertain that the Son's hypostasis, which distinguishes him from the Father.

The same reasoning applies to the Holy Spirit: for we shall presently prove that he is God, and yet it is necessary for him to be thought of as other than the Father. Indeed, this is not a distinction of essence, which it is unlawful to make manifold. Therefore, if the testimony of the apostle gains any credence, it follows that there are in God three hypostases. Since the Latins can express the same concept by the word "person," to wrangle over this clear matter is undue squeamishness and even obstinacy. If anyone longs to translate word for word, let him use "subsistence." Many have used "substance" in the same sense. Nor was the word "person" in use only among the Latins, for the Greeks, perhaps to testify their agreement, taught that there are three *prosōpoa* in God. Although they, whether Greek or Latin, differ among themselves over the word, yet they quite agree in the essential matter.

Now although the heretics rail at the word "person," or certain squeamish men cry out against admitting a term fashioned by the human mind, they cannot shake our conviction that three are spoken of, each of which is entirely God, yet that there is no more than one God. What wickedness, then, is it to disapprove of words that explain nothing else than what is attested and sealed by Scripture!

It would be enough, they say, to confine within the limits of Scripture not only our thoughts but also our words, rather than scatter foreign terms about, which would become seedbeds of dissension and strife. For thus we are wearied with quarreling over words, thus by bickering do we lose the truth, thus by hateful wrangling do we destroy love.

If they call a foreign word one that cannot be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretation not patched together out of the fabric of Scripture. But if that is "foreign" which has been curiously devised and is superstitiously defended, which conduces more to contention than to edification, which is made use of either unseasonably or fruitlessly, which by its harshness offends pious ears, which detracts from the simplicity of God's Word--I wholeheartedly embrace their soberness. For I do not feel that concerning God we should speak with less

conscientiousness than we should think, since whatever by ourselves concerning him is foolish, and whatever we speak, absurd. Yet some measure ought to be preserved: we ought to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed. But what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly on due occasion? There are quite enough examples of this sort of thing. What is to be said, moreover, when it has been proved that the church is utterly compelled to make use of the words "Trinity" and "Persons"? If anyone, then, finds fault with the novelty of the words, does he not deserve to be judged as bearing the light of truth unworthily, since he is finding fault only with what renders the truth plain and clear?

We can discern many things from the passage about Calvin himself. First, he doesn't take kindly to heretical nonsense. Second, he's quite pragmatic. Third, he's driven by his devotion to God. Fourth, Scripture is key. Fifth, he's beholden to the Church's tradition (yes, kind of strange for a Protestant, I know). But I hope that this whets your appetite because what follows it is the real meat of his presentation. I can't co-sign on everything he says to be sure, e.g., I'm not quite convinced that his discussion of each person being *autotheos* is correct, but Calvin offers more food for thought than most modern theologians could ever hope to. I wonder what his work would look like today if he were still alive to think and speak about God...