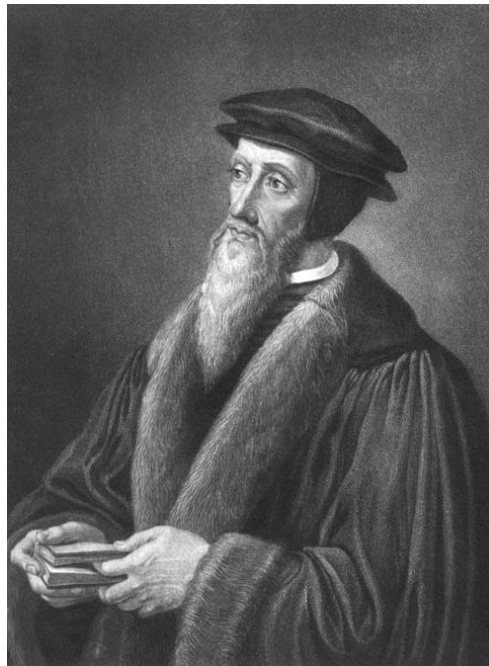


The John Calvin I (We?) Never *Really* Knew:
A Brief Survey of Calvin's Life, Theology, and Enduring Legacy

Course Facilitator: E. Preston Hicks

Course Syllabus

Fall Semester, 2009



I offer my heart to thee, Lord, promptly (willingly) and sincerely (honestly).--John Calvin's motto

The John Calvin I (We?) Never *Really* Knew: A Brief Survey of Calvin's Life, Theology, and Enduring Legacy

Background and Course Description:

July 10 of this year marked the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth in France in 1509. In celebration innumerable conferences, publications, blogs and news articles have resulted addressing questions such as: Who was the real John Calvin and why do we need to know about him? Why is Calvin still relevant today? What is his legacy?

In response to these questions, Burk Parsons, Editor of *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology* in an interview (*byFaith*, March 2009) opined: "John Calvin is relevant today because he was a churchman for all ages. Calvin's legacy is summed up in this: He was a Reformer, a pastor, and a revolutionary. He was a selfless husband, a devoted father, and a noble friend. But above all Calvin was a man whose mind was humbled and whose heart was mastered by the Lord God Almighty." Parsons' portrayal Calvin's humility in his *life*, in his *thought*, and in his *influence* certainly belies the popular perceptions of Calvin as being an authoritarian, even dictatorial, theologian who promoted a dogmatic, gloomy creed.

Calvin for certain was an ardent and tireless polemicist, defending God's kingship and majesty, and true biblical faith. However, this pursuit was also characterized by a humble confessional exposition of the gospel rather than a triumphant explanation of it. Calvin thought that theology seeks not to present the truth; but seeks to protect the Truth as revealed in Jesus Christ (Ref. *Institutes*, II:2.11). Moreover, Calvin also believed that his theology should be seen as a confession in defense of the mystery of God's revelation. The following quote provides a thematic synthesis of the scope and intent of our study here—that faith is knowledge of God given in Christ, "both revealed in our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Institutes*, III.2.7):

"Calvin's Christian faith is founded on the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, and his Christian theology is based on the conviction that God's elect are united in Christ. This union with Christ is also called "mystical union." As a mystery it can be recognized, claimed, and illustrated but—like love or friendship—not ultimately defined, nor can clear and distinct deductions be made from the heart of a mystery. Calvin's confession and his conviction are unified by the work of the Holy Spirit—the bond of union between the Father and Son and the bond of union between God and the believers." (Partee, xvi)

Due to constraints of time (and the incompetency of this facilitator) we will survey cursory biographical descriptions and several selected topics and readings from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to gain a broad view of the fascinating landscape of Calvin's life, thought and influence. It will not be possible in this survey course to mine the depths of Calvin's thought and theology. These restrictions notwithstanding, I strongly encourage participants to read the *Institutes* independently and deeply. You will not regret the experience, because you will discover not only Calvin's comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures and of the writings of the early church fathers, especially Augustine, but you will also appreciate his penetrating insights as a biblical expositor. Calvin wrote the *Institutes* not only from his intellect but from his heart also. His writings reveal his deep devotion to God and his desire to help believers deepen their (our) love of Christ and their (our) understanding of the benefits of union with Christ both now and forever.

It is my prayerful hope that diligent participants will gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the authentic John Calvin and thereby be empowered to counter some of the negative (sometimes outright hostile) caricatures and vilifications of Calvin's character and theology. Garnering this factual understanding should not, however, be interpreted as an intent to idealize Calvin, for he himself would strongly eschew any personal praise that would detract from God's sovereign majesty and glory. The overall motif for this course of study is to mirror that of the rallying call of the

Reformation: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed, always to be reformed), challenging our understanding of what it truly means to be “reformed.” For in the final analysis, the visible church must always be striving to recover biblical worship, viz., basing its doctrine and worship of the true and living triune God as presented in Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*). Tate Creek Presbyterian Church and the PCA are also called to preach and teach faithfully the gospel of grace (*sola gratia*) whereby salvation is obtained by faith alone (*sola fide*) in Christ alone (*solo Christo*) to the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*), and as well to put us on guard, maintaining constant vigilance against idolatry (false worship in all its deceptive forms) and self-righteous legalism. To this end may God be praised.

Course Outline

Session 1 (September 13, 2009)

A. Introduction to the Course

- Personal Testimony: My Christian pilgrimage toward embracing a Calvinistic, confessional worldview
- Why Study John Calvin’s Life, Theology and Legacy? Why is Calvin so often misunderstood and berated in the Christian world?

B. Overview of literary resources for the course (please refer to Reading Recommendations below)

C. What is the educational goal and pedagogical method for this course?

- The goal of the course is to provide learners an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the real John Calvin through reading excerpts of biographical material and selected segments of his *Institutes* (Calvin’s personal confession of faith). This brief survey is designed to help readers to discern the difference between what people say Calvin said and what he actually said. Selected readings will hopefully provide insight into Calvin’s impact not only as a scholar/theologian but as importantly as a pastor/preacher/teacher as well.
- The method of instruction is geared toward encouraging class participation in responding to questions from reading assignments. My role will be to select topics for discussion and to facilitate active engagement of participants in this course.

D. My prayer for us as we embark on this journey of discovery this fall semester: *That God only will be glorified and that we in our sinful weakness will be strengthened in our faith, in our union with Christ, and in our communion as saints as we study the faith and testimony of John Calvin; that through our prayer and meditations in His Word, Christ by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit will expand our knowledge and understanding of the depth of riches and wisdom of God; and, that in this endeavor we will humbly bow before His unsearchable judgments and will marvel at His inscrutable ways. For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him is glory forever. Amen.* (Ref. Romans 11:33-36)

E. Biographical Overview (Refer to “Chronology of John Calvin”—handout): Introduction to the life and times of Calvin—Part 1

- Life in Paris and Basel
- Conversion to the Protestant Reformation

F. Handout on “Humility” and reading assignments in preparation for Session 2; also please read *Institutes*, III:3-10

Interact with the following statement: “Doctrine divides; Christ unites.” Do you agree with this statement? Should Christians avoid doctrinal controversies?

Session 2 (September 20, 2009)

A. Introduction to the life and times of Calvin—Part 2

- Pilgrimages: Geneva and Strasbourg (Ref. Handout, “Chronology of John Calvin”)
- Connections with Luther and other prominent contemporary reformers
- Understanding the piety and polemics of Calvin (Ref. Handout on “Humility.” *Institutes*, II:2.11)
- Calvin’s heart for God, his piety (Ref. *Institutes*, III:3-10)
- Distinguishing Calvin from Calvinism

B. Handouts and reading assignments in preparation for Sessions 3 and 4

Session 3 (September 27, 2009)

A. Introduction and overview of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: Calvin’s confession of biblical Christianity to instruct the church, by Word and Spirit, regarding its union with Christ.

B. Why should modern reformed Christians study the *Institutes*?

C. Overall Structure of the *Institutes* (from [The Theology of John Calvin](#) by Charles Partee, 2008) with terms proclaiming that the only bond of our union with God is union with Christ—that we are united in God’s gift of faith.

Part One: God for Us

- Book I. God the Creator
- Book II. God the Redeemer

Part Two: God with Us

- Book III. The Faithful Person(s)
- Book IV. The Faithful Community

Session 4 (October 4, 2009)

Book I—Part 1

- I.1-5: Knowledge of God and self
- I.6-10: Doctrine of Holy Scripture
- I.11-12: The problem of idolatry

Session 5 (October 11, 2009)

Book I—Part 2

- I.13-15: The Trinity, creation, angels, and humanity
- I.6-18: Providence
- Discussion of doctrinal themes of Book I

Session 6 (October 18, 2009)

Book II—Part 1

- II.1-3: Calvin’s view of sin and depravity
- II.4-5: Freedom and will
- II.6-11: Gospel and Law, Ten Commandments and oaths, Old and New Testaments

Session 7 (October 25, 2009)

Book II—Part 2

- II.12-17: The person and saving work of Christ
- Discussion of the doctrinal themes of Book II

Session 8 (November 1, 2009)

Book III—Part 1

- III.1-3: The Holy Spirit, faith and assurance, repentance
- III. 4-10: The Law and the Spirit of Christ, Christian life
- III. 11-18: Justification, defense of Justification

Session 9 (November 8, 2009)

Book III—Part 2

- III.19-20: Freedom and Prayer, “The chief exercise of faith”
- III.21-24: Election
- III.25: The final resurrection
- Discussion of the doctrinal themes of Book III

Session 10 (November 15, 2009)

Book IV—Part 1

- IV.1-13: The true church, her authority, officers, discipline and vows
- IV.14: The sacraments
- IV.15-16: Baptism and paedobaptism
- IV.17-18: The benefits of Lord’s Supper, the evils of the Papal mass

Session 11 (November 22, 2009)

Book IV—Part 2

- IV.19: The false sacraments
- IV.20: On civil government
- Discussion on the doctrinal themes of Book IV

Session 12 (November 29, 2009)

Calvin the Pastor/Preacher/Teacher/Theologian/Musician/Servant

Session 13 (December 6, 2009)

Course Summary

- Calvin’s legacy: his influence on the modern world: his view of politics
- Importance to Christian discipleship (*Pietas*)

GOD BE PRAISED

Recommended Literary Resources

Reading for Class Participation and Discussion:

- Calvin, J: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vols 1&2. McNeill (Editor), Battles (Translator), Westminster Press, 1960 (Reissued 2006 by Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY)
- Battles, FW: *An Analysis of the “Institutes of the Christian Religion” of John Calvin*, P&R Publishing Co., 2001 [paper back release]
- Hall, DW and Lillback, PA: *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, P&R Publishing Co., 2008

- Hall, DW: *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World*, P&R Publishing Co., 2008

Other Helpful Sources (The subdivisions below are, admittedly, somewhat arbitrary on my part, but they are solely intended to provide my estimation of the main topical thrust of these sources under the given headings. Learners in this course should be aware that considerable topical overlap does exist in biography, legacy, theology and piety in each book.)

Biographical/Legacy:

- Selderhuis, HJ: *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2009
Charles Dunahoo (CEP Coordinator), in the Issue Two, 2009 Edition of *Equip to Disciple* (CEP), highly recommended this book. Selherhuis presents an intimate and readable portrait of Calvin's life and influence, derived primarily from personal correspondence and other sources.
- Hall, DW: *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights, and Civil Liberties*, P&R Publishing Co., 2009
This is a very accessible, well-researched account the influence of Calvin's theology upon political ideas and institutions in Western civilization.
- Web Resources: There are numerous sites, however, I was particularly impressed with a message by John Piper to the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors entitled "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching."
www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Bibliographies/1471_The_Divine_Majesty_of_the_Word/

Theology/Piety:

- Partee, C: *The Theology of John Calvin*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008
I personally found this book helped me gain a much broader appreciation of Calvin's thought. I believe it could be helpful for those who desire to delve deeper into a scholarly theological and philosophical analysis of the Institutes.
- Parsons, B (ed.): *John Calvin, A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology*. Reformation Trust Pub., A Division of Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, Fla., 2008
This was the first book I read in preparation for this course. Its title became the inspiration for the title of this elective course.
- Beeke, JR: *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, Reformation Trust Pub. (Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, Fla.) 2008

- Lawson, SJ: *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, Reformation Trust Pub. (Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, Fla.) 2007