

## Review Article

### John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*<sup>1</sup>

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THE 500<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF JOHN CALVIN'S BIRTH has led to many fresh studies by scholars, such as Professor Elsie McKee of Princeton Theological Seminary, who recently visited Melbourne to help us better appreciate Calvin's significance. She is an expert on the Genevan Reformation, having published on the eldership and diaconate there, as well as writing on Katharina Schutz Zell and the Reformation in Strasbourg. Her edition of Calvin's writings on pastoral piety is also invaluable. Currently she is researching Calvin's preaching, through the many sermons which have survived but which are only slowly being edited and published in critical editions. This has enabled her to complement the research of Dr W. Naphy and others on the impact the sermons had, by studying the evidence they offer on the development of Calvin's thought. She has placed us further in her debt by this fine first translation of Calvin's 1541 French edition of the *Institutes*, previously inaccessible in English. Even those with good modern French may find sixteenth-century French difficult and be grateful to Professor McKee.

She has written an illuminating introduction to this edition of the *Institutes*, a French translation of the 1539 Latin edition. Intended for intelligent laity, theological students and ministers, the French edition was a much-expanded version of the pocket-sized 1536 Latin first edition. The 1541 book reflected Calvin's somewhat tumultuous pastoral experience in Geneva and Strasbourg, his further reading in the Fathers, and also his contemporary exegetical preaching from the Letter to the Romans. Professor McKee points out resulting changes in both arrangement and contents, noting that whole sections have been recast and expanded to take account of current controversies between

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1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition* (Translated by Elsie A. McKee. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

Catholics and Protestants, as well as differences between Protestants. Ministerial experience to refugees in Strasbourg also alerted Calvin to the dangers of Anabaptist opinions on the restoration of the true church.

Calvin's decision to write for his French compatriots was influential. Professor McKee notes that sixteenth-century French theological scholars did not consider their vernacular a suitable language for the intricacies of theological discussion. This book was the first major theological work written in French. It was a manifesto for the conviction that theological discourse and reflection was important for all believers. All Calvin's later writings in French had the same popular audience in mind. McKee's introduction discusses why this translation is considered to be a classic by historians of the French language, who normally do not consider theological works to be significant literature. She provides appropriate examples of how elegantly he translated from Latin, offering occasional witticisms, with a popular audience in mind. So as well as providing vernacular resources for underground French congregations, the translation also offered Genevans opportunity to understand Calvin's ministerial leadership and the theology underlying his sermons and published writings. While the detailed argument of the book demanded theological stamina and patience of its readers, those who persevered would certainly have become well-informed about Christian foundations and the wide-ranging controversies of the day.

McKee also offers a helpful and frank account of the challenges she faced as a translator of sixteenth-century French into English. She notes the difficulties translators have with the punctuation of that time, with long sentences and paragraphing and the challenge of striking a satisfactory balance between a literal translation and a spirited one, which captures the meaning of Calvin's language and his commitment to a popular audience, many of whom would have had the work read to them, because they were not literate.

Even more importantly, she provides twenty-first-century readers with explanations of the way she deals with biblical quotations and references, expanding what marginal notes Calvin provided to his original readers, noting that he could make mistakes when quoting from memory. She acknowledges the debt she owes to the critical edition of this French translation by Prof Olivier Millet, published in 2008 by Droz in Geneva, though its notes were not available while she was translating into English.

Though she decided not to provide notes to the text, she has provided a complete index of biblical citations, which is invaluable to modern readers who want to track the manner in which Calvin biblically supported the authority of his writing, over the course of his ministry. The full index of names also enables readers to see the extent

to which Calvin quoted the major Fathers, such as Augustine and Chrysostom, as well as his engagement with the contemporary Sorbonists and Anabaptists. Altogether it is very helpful for McKee to have such a brief introduction for modern readers, including a reminder that Calvin distinguished between speaking of human beings and identifying male or female persons. McKee has translated accordingly, in order that her English text preserves some of the nuances of the Latin and French editions, thereby making his text more readable to us, "while still maintaining evidence of the male-oriented, if not male-centred world of Calvin himself" (p. xviii).

In over 700 closely argued pages, Calvin set out an expanded version of his 1536 exposition of the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments. He had moved from being an exiled young scholar, through experience of ministry in Geneva, to expulsion from that task, to being a refugee pastor in Strasbourg. That widened his experience of ministry and opened him to the potent influence of Martin Bucer. He was also steadily deepening his knowledge of the Fathers, other Reformation theologians, Catholic opponents and radical preachers in Strasbourg, who claimed to be restoring an authentic church by following the Bible alone. Refuting the views of these radical preachers may explain the extent of some of the material added in this new version. Instead of seven chapters, there were seventeen. As McKee points out, he had new material on penitence, justification by faith, the relationship between Old and New Testaments and on predestination and providence. His original chapter on Christian freedom, ecclesiastical power and political authority was divided into three much more focussed chapters. The new edition concluded with a moving chapter on the Christian life, often later to be published separately. Calvin insisted that he was succinctly outlining the great themes of Scripture, so that readers could intelligently relate these to his weekly exegesis in sermons and the commentaries he hoped to produce.

The translation provides a fascinating window into the rapid development of Calvin's thought and the priorities of the Reformed Churches that looked to him for guidance. Modern Christians may well find Calvin's constant emphases on God's sovereign judgement on sin and the need for self-abasement a distortion of the Bible, but they need to weigh his constant references to the Scriptures. Exposition of fundamental themes is accompanied by very abusive, detailed refutation of Catholic defenders of traditional belief. He expected his readers to appreciate Greek philosophers and to understand the baleful influence of medieval scholars. Obedience to God's revelation in the Word, illumined by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was fundamental to authentic discipleship. Again and again, he returns to human capacity for self-deception and folly, with which every believer

must contend, for false constructions of Christianity abound. He wanted instead to present an authoritative account of authentic Catholicism.

Yet Calvin is not narrowly theological. He also is insistent on the goodness of God's gifts in creation. He underlines the importance of enjoying them and recognises the appropriate place of natural law and common insight into the features of a functioning human community, shaped by authentic Christianity. That in turn rests on the gift of faith, "a certain knowledge of God's will towards us, which being founded on the promise given freely in Jesus Christ, is revealed to our understanding and sealed in our heart by the Holy Spirit" (p. 179). Like Luther, Calvin insisted that justification by faith alone is the principal article of the Christian faith. Taking away the merit of works did not entice people to unrighteousness, as Catholics maintained. It gave sole place to the blood of Christ, thereby placing good works on their proper foundation. Many of Calvin's French-speaking contemporaries found these insights liberating.

Similarly, his restatement of the doctrines of predestination and providence gave an invaluable alternative to current Catholic teaching. Calvin insisted these doctrines were a sanctuary of divine wisdom and personal assurance, so long as people were content to adore, rather than understand more than the Scriptures provided. Nor did Calvin believe that being predestined to salvation gave one a false sense of security. It was more dangerous to have a carnal nonchalance about salvation, "which snuffs out humility and reverence for God and induces forgetfulness of His graces" (p. 436).

Recognising that all that happens was according to God's ordering was a basis for prayer, for we must have a right attitude to God to hold conversations with Him. Above all we must pray with certain hope that we would receive our requests. Prayer to the saints was superfluous, an example of casting away the bridle of the Word, so that superstition goes astray without limits.

Calvin's exposition of the Lord's Prayer was clear and practical, a reminder of how theology and piety ought to intersect. That was further underlined by his understanding of the sacraments. A sacrament is "an external sign by which our Lord represents and testifies His goodwill towards us to support and confirm the weakness of our faith" (p. 495). Through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments transform our hearts. "Otherwise they would only strike our ears and present themselves to our eyes but would not penetrate or move within" (p. 499). In the four chapters that Calvin devoted to the sacraments, he showed how they were truly efficacious, over against Anabaptists who said too little and Catholics who said too much.

He stoutly defended infant baptism against the "crazy fantasies" of the radicals, which made parents negligent in instructing their

children. "For it is a significant good to incite us to nourish them in true piety and obedience to God when we hear that from their birth the Lord has received them among His people, as members of His church" (p. 545). The Lord's Supper "assures and confirms us that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was given for us in such a way that it is now ours and it will be so perpetually" (p. 546). Emphatic about Christ's real presence, he underlines that this is a mystery.

Celebrating the sacraments gives us practice in rejoicing in Christ's death, as well as inciting us to greater vehemence in faith and kindling love in us. Partaking of the Lord's Supper only once a year was "satanic". Once weekly was the Gospel ideal, even though Genevan authorities, to Calvin's dismay, settled for a quarterly service. Calvin dealt carefully with unworthy partaking. He also emphatically denied that Christ's one sacrifice could be re-presented by priestly consecration, whenever Mass was observed. The only sacrifice was praise and consecration to God in one's vocation. His discussion of the five misnamed sacraments included one on ordination, which aimed to show that priests were not given unique powers or status.

Christian liberty, another vital theme, was to be understood spiritually. Without a proper understanding of its significance, neither Jesus Christ nor the Gospel could be rightly known. Such spiritual liberty enabled believers rightly to use God's good gifts, to be sensitive to weaker brothers, to respect those of different status and to be liberated from confusing the spiritual and civil kingdoms. "I think I have beaten down our adversaries well enough, that no one will doubt any more, that the spiritual power in which the pope and all his kingdom glory is a blasphemous tyranny against God's Word, and unjust to His church" (p. 647).

The chapter on political administration defined the partnership of church and magistrate, within mutual obedience to God. He totally rejected Anabaptist repudiation of citizenship, insisting that individuals as private persons must reverence those in authority as God's ministers, even where their rule was evil. There was no place for individual resistance, only prayer. Yet Calvin allowed one important qualification. Parliaments had the duty of calling rulers to account. That concession was to have great future importance in countries where the Reformed Churches were strong, developing in ways which would have appalled this book's author.

The final chapter on the Christian life shows why Calvin inspired contemporaries to trust the scriptural order, which imprinted a love of righteousness on their hearts and gave them a certain rule, which prevented them from wandering. Calvin outlined two basic steps. The first was obedience to the Word and submission to the Holy Spirit. The second was to seek those things, which are pleasing to God and glorify Him. Because we all have a world of vices within us, we must extirpate

all ambition and desire for human glory and seek instead to do good to all. That was an essential mark of Christian identity.

Given that we live in a broken world, where misery and calamity abound, we must learn how to bear the cross as Jesus Christ did. Calvin spoke from personal knowledge about coping with persecution, bitter experience and sorrow, through the succour provided by God's consolation, which he so eloquently described in this book.

This edition of the *Institutes* offers important insights into Calvin's belief that doctrine must be related to daily life through our vocation. The God he wanted people to worship was one who demanded total obedience, but who provided sure guidance by Word and Spirit to all those who had been elected to know Jesus Christ by faith. There was no gap between what God required of the ordained and of all believers, for all shared the same priesthood. The book is a skilfully integrated narrative of invitation, warning and advice, showing how Calvin's thought on what Christian leaders and laity needed to know had moved significantly in the five years that had passed from the writing of the first edition.

Professor McKee has placed us greatly in her debt with the production of this lively translation, preceded by an introduction. It helps us to see how a remarkable mind wrestled with the great issues of faith and context, never hesitating to denounce what he saw as error, as part of his clarification of what was God's revealed truth to sinful humanity. Those who are heirs of the Reformed heritage would particularly benefit from reading and pondering this book's message, but he belongs to the whole Church, as many contemporary Roman Catholic Calvin scholars have reminded us. Members of all Christian traditions could benefit from studying this translation of the early Calvin, by asking how it can speak to our generation, by challenging us all to reflect biblically and critically on our methods for commending the Catholic Christian faith today.