

A STUDY GUIDE TO
Calvin's *Institutes*

A STUDY GUIDE TO

Calvin's *Institutes*



by Douglas Wilson

canonpress 
Moscow, Idaho

This book is dedicated to my colleague,
Dr. Roy Atwood, who was, if memory serves,
the first living Calvinist I had ever met. I knew
about them from history books, but here was one
who actually thought this way, alive in modern
times. Imagine my astonishment.

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *A Study Guide to Calvin's Institutes*
Copyright © 2011 by Douglas Wilson

Quotations in this publication are taken from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. O'Neill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1961).

Cover design by Rachel Hoffmann.
Interior design by Laura Storm.

Printed in the United States of America.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilson, Douglas, 1953-
A study guide to Calvin's Institutes / by Douglas Wilson.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-1-59128-086-6 (pbk.)
ISBN-10: 1-59128-086-9 (pbk.)
1. Calvin, Jean, 1509-1564. Institutio Christianae religionis. 2. Reformed Church--
Doctrines. 3. Theology, Doctrinal. I. Title.
BX9420.I653W55 2011
230'.42--dc22

2011007239

11 12 13 14 15 16

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	11
Initial Remarks	15
Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France ..	17

Book One • 23

The knowledge of God the Creator

Chapter 1	23
Chapter 2	24
Chapter 3	26
Chapter 4	27
Chapter 5	29
Chapter 6	32
Chapter 7	33
Chapter 8	35
Chapter 9	38
Chapter 10	39
Chapter 11	39
Chapter 12	43
Chapter 13	44
Chapter 14	55
Chapter 15	62
Chapter 16	64
Chapter 17	66
Chapter 18	70

Book Two • 73

The knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel

Chapter 1.....	73
Chapter 2.....	76
Chapter 3.....	83
Chapter 4.....	87
Chapter 5	89
Chapter 6	94

Chapter 7	95
Chapter 8	99
Chapter 9	112
Chapter 10	113
Chapter 11	118
Chapter 12	121
Chapter 13	123
Chapter 14	124
Chapter 15	126
Chapter 16	127
Chapter 17	132

Book Three • 133

*The way in which we receive the grace of Christ;
what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow*

Chapter 1	133
Chapter 2	134
Chapter 3	143
Chapter 4	149
Chapter 5	157
Chapter 6	160
Chapter 7	161
Chapter 8	163
Chapter 9	166
Chapter 10	167
Chapter 11	169
Chapter 12	174
Chapter 13	176
Chapter 14	177
Chapter 15	181
Chapter 16	183
Chapter 17	184
Chapter 18	187
Chapter 19	190
Chapter 20	193
Chapter 21	204
Chapter 22	206
Chapter 23	209
Chapter 24	213
Chapter 25	218

Book Four • 221

*The external means or aids by which God invites us
into the society of Christ and holds us therein*

Chapter 1	221
Chapter 2	228
Chapter 3	231
Chapter 4	236
Chapter 5	240
Chapter 6	244
Chapter 7	248
Chapter 8	255
Chapter 9	258
Chapter 10	261
Chapter 11	268
Chapter 12	272
Chapter 13	278
Chapter 14	283
Chapter 15	291
Chapter 16	295
Chapter 17	303
Chapter 18	314
Chapter 19	319
Chapter 20	327



INTRODUCTION

I became what is popularly known as a “Calvinist” sometime in 1988. It is a long and sordid tale, and to this day I am not *quite* sure what happened. There were various factors in play, as there always are with such things. The first was that I was preaching through Romans. I can recall telling one of our elders that I did not know what I was going to say when I got to “those chapters.” When I began preaching through the book, I was not Calvinistic, and when I finished, I was. So that was one factor. I got to chapter eight and decided, “Oh, well,” and just preached what it said. After all, I had nothing better to do.

Another significant factor was that I had encountered openness theology for the first time—the idea that chance governs some things, and God doesn’t really know the future. The future does not exist in such a way as to *be* known. My conservative evangelical instincts recoiled from this, but because I was Arminian in all my “default” assumptions, I could not answer this position, given my premises. That was a problem.

The third factor was that I was entranced with the idea of “worldview thinking,” applying the Scriptures to every aspect of life. This was an impulse that went way back, but it started to congeal in significant ways in the early eighties. With some other Christians, I was involved in the founding of Logos School, and one of our guiding principles had been to teach all subjects as parts of an integrated whole, with the Scriptures at the center. That’s all very well, but when you go out there and try to find books by evangelical Christians on how the faith relates to politics, banking, foreign policy, agriculture, literature, economics, art, architecture, and medicine, you will quickly find yourself reading books by almost no one but Calvinists. I became aware of this, and decided that I would read Calvinists on anything except Calvinism. They were reliable guides all over the world—everywhere but their hometown.

But my inability to answer the openness position battered down my prejudices even at this point. I didn't like this "chance business," and surely, I thought, the Calvinists would have something good to say about chance. And so they did.

However, despite all this, I was still not prepared to ask Calvin into my heart. But that reminds me. If anyone who is not Calvinistic picks up this book for whatever reason, and his eyes happened to fall on the first sentence of this paragraph, and he is not amused, I would hasten to add that this was a joke, as in, not serious. That was another surprise. Calvinists, it turns out, have a very robust sense of humor. "Was that an example of it?" you ask. In reply I suggest that we just move on.

I was still not prepared for any of this to be true. There were two things going on. One was the argument itself and the other was my unwillingness to have the argument come to certain conclusions. I remember where I was standing in my living room when I told God I was willing for all of this to be true. "That's awfully big of you," the universe said in reply, and I thought I detected a note of sarcasm, but it was a big deal for me at the time. Up to that point I had *not* been willing for it to be true. Once I acknowledged that I would be willing in principle to lay down my prejudices, I did not immediately become a Calvinist. But I was no longer prevented from that happening by an intellectual dishonesty and pride. That surrender is why, when I got to that place in Romans, the fruit just fell off the branch.

To change the metaphor yet again, when I fell down the Reformation stairs, I hit my head on every step. I spent the first couple of years after all this happened denying I was "a Calvinist." This was because I had no intention of being a partisan follower of Calvin, regardless of how great he was. The church had had quite enough of the "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos" factionalism, and I did not want to add to it. The irony was I had learned all this Calvinism from Paul primarily—so I did not want to say I was "of Calvin." I did not want to do this because Paul had been very stern with people who had claimed they were "of Paul," and I wanted to follow him, not Calvin, because I was . . . of Paul.

And of course, by simply calling myself a "simple Christian," I should have realized that I was not necessarily avoiding the problem. There was a super-spiritual faction at Corinth as well, one that went well beyond allegiance to Paul and Apollos. You see, they were "of Christ," and it appears that they may well have been the worst of the lot (1 Cor. 1:12). There is an appropriate way to resolve everything in Christ (1 Cor. 3:22), and there is a hyperfactional way to do it. There is a sectarian way to

be “of Paul,” and there is a God-honoring way to do it (1 Cor. 4:14–16). But I did not know all this at the time, and so spent a goodly amount of energy denying that I was a Calvinist, when it was obvious to pretty much everybody that this was exactly what I was.

All I succeeded in doing was to make people believe that, in addition to adopting this appalling theology, I had decided to cover it all over with a layer of disingenuousness. It looked like I had taken the flinty rock of predestination and poured the oil of insincerity all over it. So finally I gave up, faced facts, and admitted that I was a Calvinist—but *only* as a form of theological shorthand. Jonathan Edwards put it this way—“I should not take it all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction’s sake.”¹ Aye, for distinction’s sake.

Now I had read through Calvin’s *Institutes* a few years before all this had happened to me. I was impressed at that time, but not convinced. I was simply doing my bit to become acquainted with the great literature of our civilization, which included Calvin, and, like I said, I was impressed. I was mostly impressed by the energy of his writing. This was real, whatever else it was.

Many years later, safely within the Calvinist fold, I was leading a men’s forum for our church, and we began working our way through Calvin’s *Institutes*. We would discuss a specified portion, and I had decided to draft study questions to help the men work through the material. Somewhere in Book 1, I think, we got waylaid and were somehow “overtaken by events,” and so that project got set aside and slept peacefully for some years in my computer. But then, some years after that, the five-hundredth anniversary of Calvin’s birth rolled around, and I noticed a number of Christian organizations gearing up to celebrate it. Princeton decided to publish a read-through-the-*Institutes*-in-a-year schedule on the web, and since I now had a blog, and a headstart well into Book 1, I thought I could use the year as a disciplined way of finishing this study guide. And, with a few glitches here and there, that is what happened.

Here are a few suggestions on the use of this study guide. C. S. Lewis points out, in his essay on the reading of old books, that classics are often unnecessarily intimidating for modern readers.² But many of them became classics precisely because they were so accessible—it is their

1. Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Lafayette: Sovereign Grace, 2001 [1754]), ix.

2. C. S. Lewis, “Introduction” in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1996).

commentators that are opaque. As one old parishioner said to his pastor after the sermon, “This here Bible sheds a lot of light on them there commentaries.” Calvin is engaging, pithy, funny, earthly, profound, and entirely dedicated to Jesus. So this study guide is not intended to get in between the reader and Calvin, but rather to provide a nudge that might get someone to pick up Calvin in order to read for himself. I would suggest reading the appropriate section in Calvin, then looking at the questions in the study guide, and writing down Calvin’s answers in a separate notebook. The reader can then compare his answers with those that are provided in the guide. Given the scope of Calvin’s work, it is not to be expected that every sound answer will be identical to another. My suggested answers should be considered more as discussion starters than as an answer “key.” If you disagree with a suggested answer, it may be that I messed something up. It may be that you did. In either case, we can disagree with each other, which is something else that Calvinists do well.

Another possible use is for a leader to utilize this guide for a group study. He can assign a reading, give the questions to the participants beforehand, and then use the guide to help conduct the discussion. The same can be done for classroom use. This study guide is based on the Battles translation, but can probably be used with others.

In closing, be prepared for surprises in Calvin. He is a Calvinist, obviously, but he is no tidy, doctrinaire Calvinist. The words of Karl Barth are descriptive here—“Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I lack completely the means, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately.”³ To which I can only add, no kidding.

Douglas Wilson
Christ Church

Festival of the Anniversary of the Death of St. Dunstan’s Cat, 2011

3. Karl Barth, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 101.



INITIAL REMARKS

[1559]

John Calvin to the Reader

1. Did Calvin expect the first edition of the *Institutes* to be as successful as it was?
No, he did not “in the least” expect that.
2. In what way did Calvin maintain that he had been maligned?
He believed he had been maligned to the utter limit: “No one [has been] assailed, bitten, and wounded by more false accusations than I.”
3. How did Calvin intend the *Institutes* to be ministerial preparation?
To prepare men for the ministry by giving them easy access to the Word, and to enable them to advance in it without stumbling.
4. In what way were his commentaries linked to the *Institutes*?
The Institutes paved the way for his work in the commentaries.

[1560]

Subject Matter of the Present Work

1. Why did Calvin translate the *Institutes* into French?
It was in Latin to serve all men of learning, and he translated it into French desiring to bear fruit in that nation.
2. What value did Calvin place on this work?
He did not want to seem to value it too highly, but he did think it opened up a way to a good and right understanding of Scripture.
3. The reading of the *Institutes* was meant to be an introduction to the study of what?
It was an introduction to the study of the Bible.
4. How did Calvin want the reader of the *Institutes* to evaluate the teaching that was offered there?
Calvin wanted the reader to compare what he was teaching to the teaching of Scripture.



PREFATORY ADDRESS

TO KING FRANCIS I OF FRANCE

[1]

Circumstances in Which the Book Was First Written

1. What was Calvin's intention in writing the first edition of the *Institutes*?
To convey the rudiments of the faith to those who had a zeal for religion, that they might come to true godliness.
2. What made it necessary to expand the work so that it also became a defense to the king on behalf of the Protestants?
The fury of certain wicked persons. Calvin thought their slanders made it necessary to kill two birds with one stone—instruct believers and present a confession of faith to the king.
3. If a mere accusation is all that is necessary to convict someone of wrongdoing, then what is necessarily threatened with extinction?
No innocence remains for any man.
4. What was the central slander directed against the Protestants?
That they were politically subversive and wanted to turn everything upside down.
5. If all the slanders were in fact true, what does Calvin allow to be just?
That the doctrine and its authors were worthy of a thousand fires and crosses.

[2]

Plea for the Persecuted Evangelicals

1. What is Calvin's attitude toward France, his native land?
He says he has as much natural affection as becomes him.
2. Since it was not the king's idea, the persecution of the Protestants was the result of tyranny from what kind of individual?
It was more through the tyranny of certain Pharisees.
3. What, according to Calvin, constitutes true kingship?
The recognition that one is a minister of God in governing His kingdom.

4. What were Calvin's adversaries unable to bear the thought of?
They cannot bear to admit weakness.
5. The persecutors insisted on maintaining at least one of two things. What were they?
To keep their rule intact and their bellies full.

[3]

Charges of Antagonists Refuted: Newness, Uncertainty, the Value of Miracles

1. How does Calvin respond to the charge that the teaching of the Protestants is a novelty?
He says that the teaching of God's word is no novelty.
2. If it is new, in what way is it new?
It is new to them.
3. In response to the charge that this teaching is uncertain or doubtful, how does Calvin turn the tables?
By pointing out that this is a pattern in Scripture (Is. 1:3), and by showing that they were not prepared to die for the things they claimed to be certain about.
4. In what way did miracles confirm the Protestant teaching? In what way not?
Miracles are the seal of the gospel. How could it be undermining miracles to preach the gospel? Contemporary miracles were unnecessary.
5. How did Calvin respond to the miracles that were purported to have established the teaching of Rome?
The same way Augustine answered the Donatists. The Bible warns of false teachers working miracles.

[4]

Misleading Claim That the Church Fathers Oppose the Reformation Teaching

1. If the contest between the forces of Reformation and those opposed to it was to be decided through an appeal to the church fathers alone, which way would it go?
The tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would be with the Reformers.

2. Were the church fathers without fault in what they taught? And what did the Roman church do with those faults? What illustration does Calvin use to portray this?

No, they were not without fault. But Calvin says the Roman church exalts the faults of the fathers and ignores the virtues. They gather dung amid gold.

3. Does Calvin sidestep the teaching of the fathers, or does he cite them to support his teaching?

He cites a number of them in support.

4. If the fathers were alive in Calvin's day, what is the last thing they would suppose the "sophists" of Rome were discussing?

The last thing they would suppose as the subject of discussion would be God. Their brawling arts were not theology, Calvin says.

[5]

The Appeal to "Custom" Against Truth

1. Why does Calvin not wish to be bound by custom?

To force him to submit to custom would be to treat him most unjustly.

2. What is the alternative to completely despairing of human affairs?

To grapple with the great evils or forcibly quell them.

3. What does the Lord do when many ages agree on a particular impiety?

Truth is not determined by majority vote. Scripture teaches what the end is for those who sin with the multitude.

[6]

Errors about the Nature of the Church

1. According to Calvin, upon what is the Church's existence based?

The reign of Christ at the right hand of the Father.

2. What are the two claims about the Church that Rome makes?

First, that the form of the Church is always apparent and observable, and secondly, this form is found in the Roman church and its hierarchy.

3. According to Calvin, does the existence of the Church depend upon a particular outward form?

No, it can exist under a number of forms.

4. What are the two marks of the Church that Calvin gives here?

The pure preaching of the word and the lawful administration of the sacraments.

5. To what effect does Calvin quote Hilary against the outward pretensions of Rome?

That the Antichrist would have all the splendor that some churchmen gloried in.

6. How does Calvin answer the argument for the Church from “pomp” and influence?

The synod that condemned Christ had pomp and influence.

[7]

Tumults Alleged to Result from Reformation Preaching

1. When the word of God is active, what is the response of Satan?

He takes up arms. He opposes no one when no one opposes him.

2. What did Satan try first to oppose the Reformation? What was his second move?

First he tried force. After that he tried disagreements and contentions, stirred up by the Catabaptists (Anabaptists).

3. What examples from Scripture does Calvin produce with regard to the same charge? List three.

Elijah was charged with troubling Israel, Jesus was accused of sedition, and the apostles were said to have stirred up the people.

4. In the New Testament, when the apostles saw that the gospel was resulting in tumults, what ought they to have done?

Calvin asks rhetorically if the apostles ought to have quit preaching when they saw the tumults that resulted. The answer, of course, is no.

[8]

Let the King Beware of Acting on False Charges: The Innocent Await Divine Vindication

1. How does Calvin address the charge that the Reformers were seditious?

He simply denies it, and he appeals to the common knowledge that the Protestants prayed for the prosperity of the king and his kingdom and were a common and simple people.

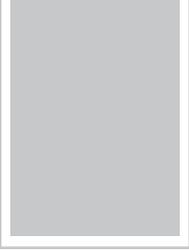
2. Even though they are on the run, what do the Protestants continue to pray for?

They continue to pray for the same, even though they are now fugitives.

3. What does Calvin believe should be done with those who “deck out” their vices in the liberty of God’s grace?

He says there are laws that can be used to penalize such, according to their deserts.

4. If the king determines not to listen, how does Calvin warn him?
He appeals to God as the ultimate judge, the one who delivers the poor from their affliction.
5. What is Calvin's final prayer for the king?
That the Lord would establish His throne in righteousness and His dominion in equity.



BOOK ONE

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD
THE CREATOR

————— CHAPTER ONE —————

[1]

Knowledge of Self

1. In what sense can we say that Calvin's epistemology has dual starting points?

We begin with knowledge of God and with knowledge of ourselves.

2. Does Calvin argue for God's existence, or does he assume it?

He assumes it—he builds on that knowledge.

3. Would Calvin agree that in order to know God, a man must know himself as knowing?

Yes, knowledge of oneself would include this awareness.

4. Would Calvin agree that this means a man should start his epistemological journey by trying to come to a knowledge of himself?

No, he would not agree with that.

5. What is the motive a man should have in turning from knowledge of himself to knowing God?

If we know ourselves rightly, then we know how vain, impoverished, and infirm we are. This leads us to turn to God.

[2]

Knowledge of God

1. What does knowledge of God reveal to a man?

The fact of his own sinfulness.

2. What is the sole standard of all judgment of man?

The nature and character of God Himself.