

EDITORIAL

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A Review of *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary*

David J. Engelsma

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Calvin's *Institutes* is one of the seminal works of the western world!¹ If we are not mistaken, it has influenced and continues to influence thinking in both church and state.

It may help, therefore, to put it briefly in its historical context. About 1400 AD, the long period of mediaevalism gave way to the Renaissance, the revival of learning. Through the years the church had increased in power—and inevitably corruption! The evil, particularly in the papacy, was widely recognized. Then a solitary monk, whose studies in the epistle to the Romans brought him to grasp the doctrine of justification, nailed his theses against indulgences on the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg on 31 October, 1517. The Reformation under Luther had begun! It spread rapidly in Germany, and then under Zwingli in Switzerland.

In Paris, the doctrines were discussed in the university and were widely-embraced by the upper classes. Among those converted was John Calvin (c. 1529-1530). The first edition of the *Institutes* was completed in 1535 and published in 1536, the year Calvin was detained by Farel in Geneva. Over the years, it was steadily enlarged and revised, and the final Latin edition came out in 1559. My copy, dated 1561, is a stout Latin volume of some thousand pages. It was translated into French by Calvin and it soon appeared in other translations including English.

All the Reformation creeds are broadly Calvinistic: the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the *Canons of Dordt* and the crowning glory of a hundred years of theological debate, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, from which Congregationalists and Baptists derive their respective confessions.

¹*Institutes* is from the Latin *institutio*, meaning education or instruction.

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The consensus did not last. By the 1900s, evangelicals were assailed by liberalism on the one hand and Anglo-Catholicism on the other, and, as far as I can judge, hunkered down in an anti-intellectual, pietistic Arminianism! It is to the honour of the Sovereign Grace Union that in 1920 an English abridgement by J. P. Wiles of the *Institutes* came out (reissued in 1966).

But the situation was changing, and a great deal was down to the ministry of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Amongst much else, he persuaded James Clarke to reissue the Beveridge translation of the *Institutes*, which duly appeared in 1949 in two handsome volumes at thirty shillings (£1.50).

Sixty years ago, I saw the *Institutes* in the room of a fellow student at Trinity College, Dublin. I knew little, if anything, of Calvin, but noted the fact and, in due course, acquired a set. But I was defeated by its voluminousness. When young there seemed plenty of time, too often I fear frittered away on idle reading!

Time went on and retirement arrived, giving the necessary freedom to read the *Institutes* in the Battles edition. I do recollect, on more than one occasion I think, wishing I had read Calvin earlier, especially when the *Institutes* solved a problem I'd long wrestled with!

Professor Engelsma knows the *Institutes* and has lectured on them at the Protestant Reformed Seminary. In his opinion, to quote from his preface,

There ought to be a one volume summary—not an abridgment, but a summary—of Calvin's great work for the burdened seminar-ian, the busy pastor, the elder working on behalf of the church after he has put in a full day at his occupation, and the laity carrying out their time-consuming responsibilities at home, on the job, and in the church ... the reader of this book [i.e., Engelsma's *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin*] will know the *Institutes* and the faith—the Reformed faith—that Calvin taught and defended in this classic work.

In my judgment, he has succeeded.

In the biographical chapter 1, "The Man and His Life: A Sketch," Engelsma puts the *Institutes* in its historical context. In chapter 2, we have "The Nature of the *Institutes*;" in chapter 3, "The History of the Publishing of the *Institutes*"

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and in chapter 4, “The Style and Structure of the *Institutes*.” Chapter 5 deals with “The Prefatory Address” to Francis I, the King of France.

It may help to illustrate what Engelsma has done by considering, for example, his exposition of Calvin’s treatment of justification. In the Battles edition, it runs from Book 3, chapters 11 to 19—over 120 pages. Here it is compressed into one chapter of 25 pages. For Calvin, as for Luther, justification is by faith alone; both held precisely the same doctrine. It is the act of God our Judge in which He forgives the believer’s sins and acquits him of guilt, imputing to him Christ’s righteousness. Justification and sanctification are distinct saving works of God: the first making the believing sinner righteous by imputation and the second making the believing sinner holy by the inner renewing of the Spirit. They are inseparable! “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (I Cor. 1:30).

Rome dare not deny that man is justified by faith because this is often stated in so many words in Scripture. But they do deny justification by faith *alone*! Calvin supports Luther that this truth is implicit in Romans 3:28. But now comes something new. Following the “Presbyterian” theologian Norman Shepherd, there has arisen the Federal Vision theology in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Prof. Engelsma has studied and written about this new error, which has carried some across to Rome. So he is not only summarizing Calvin, but updating him.

Throughout this fine work, Prof. Engelsma calls attention to specific theological issues. Since theology like all sciences is progressive, and since Engelsma has written on the Trinity, he even ventures to correct and add to Calvin in this area!

Discussing the observance of the fourth commandment, Calvin speaks of “some restless spirits ... stirring up tumult over the Lord’s day.” Prof. Engelsma remarks on Reformed churches of our day “tolerating the disregard and profanation of the day by their members.”

In eschatology, Calvin rejects Chiliasm! (Quite correctly I judge! If all persons, good and bad, are to be raised up for the judgment at the last day, there cannot be a resurrection a thousand years earlier!)

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I found the section on the church interesting—indeed exciting. What are the marks of a true church? The pure preaching of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments! We live in a country full of churches! My village has three. But virtually none have these marks. I travel eight miles (some of our members nearly forty) to church, but in many parts of this kingdom there is nothing within practical reach! A truly dire situation. Interestingly, Calvin does not press the issue of discipline. He knew—and most pastors know—that tares grow up with the wheat, and he quotes Cyprian, “Let a man mercifully correct what he can; let him patiently bear what he cannot correct, and groan and sorrow over it with love.”

An extensive section is devoted to the errors of Rome; the Reformers saw the Papacy as Antichrist. Rightly, issue is taken with the Anabaptists over infant baptism. The errors do not change!

The book concludes with a brief treatment of Calvin on civil government.

Calvin was a man quite exceptionally gifted by God for the place he was to occupy in the Reformation from Popery. He devoted his life to biblical preaching, teaching, exposition, tracts, letters. His collected works run to fifty-nine quarto volumes! The *Institutes* are the summit. All evangelicals should read them! David Engelsma has supplied us with a compact modern summary with practical relevance to our current situation. We hope it has a wide circulation, and if that leads some to tackle the original that can only be to the good.²

²David Engelsma's *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary* is available for £19.80 (including P&P) from the CPRC Bookstore (7 Lislunnan Road, Kells, N Ireland BT42 3NR or 028 25 891851).