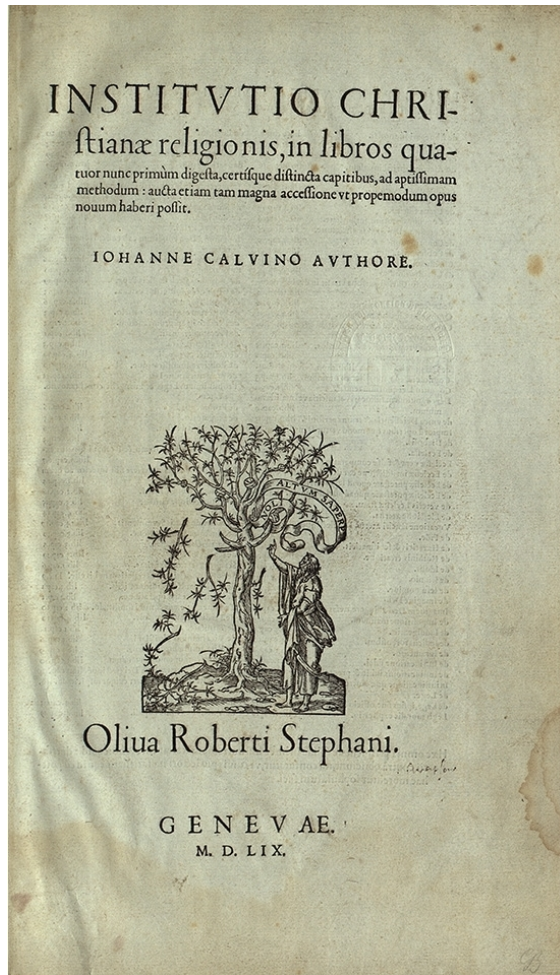


# Institutes of the Christian Religion



The title page from the 1559 edition of John Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis*

*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Latin: *Institutio Christianae religionis*) is John Calvin's seminal work of Protestant systematic theology. Highly influential in the Western world<sup>[1]</sup> and still widely read by theological students today, it was published in Latin in 1536 (at the same time as the English King Henry VIII's *Dissolution of the Monasteries*) and in his native French in 1541 (it was a landmark in the elaboration of the French language in the 16th century to become a national language) with the definitive editions appearing in 1559 (Latin) and in 1560 (French).

The book was written as an introductory textbook on the Protestant faith for those with some previous knowledge of theology and covered a broad range of theological topics from the doctrines of church and sacraments

to justification by faith alone and Christian liberty. It vigorously attacked the teachings of those Calvin considered *unorthodox*, particularly Roman Catholicism to which Calvin says he had been “strongly devoted” before his conversion to Protestantism.

The *Institutes* is a highly regarded secondary reference for the system of doctrine adopted by the Reformed churches, usually called Calvinism.

## 1 History

Calvin's *magnum opus*, begun early in his life and regularly revised until near his death, remained substantially the same in its content throughout.<sup>[2]</sup> It overshadowed the earlier Protestant theologies such as Melancthon's *Loci Communes* and Zwingli's *Commentary on the True and False Religion*. According to historian Philip Schaff, it is a classic of theology at the level of Origen's *On First Principles*, Augustine's *The City of God*, Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, and Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*.<sup>[2]</sup>

The original Latin edition appeared in 1536 with a preface addressed to King Francis I of France, written on behalf of the French Protestants (*Huguenots*) who were being persecuted. Most often, references to the *Institutes* are to Calvin's final Latin edition of 1559, which was expanded and revised from earlier editions. Calvin wrote five major Latin editions in his lifetime (1536, 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559). He translated the first French edition of the *Institutes* in 1541, corresponding to his 1539 Latin edition, and supervised the translation of three later French translations. The French translations of Calvin's *Institutes* helped to shape the French language for generations, not unlike the influence of the King James Version for the English language. The final edition of the *Institutes* is approximately five times the length of the first edition.

In English, five complete translations have been published - four from the Latin and one from the French. The first was made in Calvin's lifetime (1561) by Thomas Norton, the son-in-law of the English Reformer Thomas Cranmer. In the nineteenth century there were two translations, one by John Allen (1813) and one by Henry Beveridge (1845). The most recent from Latin is the 1960 edition, translated by Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill, currently considered the most authoritative edition by scholars. Calvin's first French edition (1541) has been translated by Elsie Anne McKee (2009).

Due to the length of the *Institutes*, several abridged versions have been made. The most recent is by Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne; the text is their own alteration and abridgment of the Beveridge translation.

A history of the Latin, French, Greek, Canadian, British, German, African, and English versions of Calvin's *Institutes* was done by B. B. Warfield, "On the Literary History of Calvin's Institutes," published in the seventh American edition of the John Allen translation (Philadelphia, 1936).

## 2 Contents

*Institutes* in its first form was not merely an exposition of Reformation doctrine; it proved the inspiration to a new form of Christian life for many. It is indebted to Martin Luther in the treatment of faith and sacraments, to Martin Bucer in what is said of divine will and predestination, and to the later scholastics for teaching involving unsuspected implications of freedom in the relation of church and state.<sup>[3]</sup>

The book is prefaced by a letter to Francis I. As this letter shows, *Institutes* was composed, or at least completed, to meet a present necessity, to correct an aspersion on Calvin's fellow reformers. The French king, wishing to suppress the Reformation at home, yet unwilling to alienate the reforming princes of Germany, had sought to confound the teachings of the French reformers with the attacks of Anabaptists on civil authority. "My reasons for publishing the Institutes," Calvin wrote in 1557, "were first that I might vindicate from unjust affront my brethren whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord, and next that some sorrow and anxiety should move foreign people, since the same sufferings threaten many." "The hinges on which our controversy turns," says Calvin in his letter to the king, "are that the Church may exist without any apparent form" and that its marks are "pure preaching of the word of God and rightful administration of the sacraments."

Despite the dependence on earlier writers, *Institutes* was felt by many to be a new voice, and within a year there was demand for a second edition. This came in 1539, amplifying especially the treatment of the fall of man, of election, and of reprobation, as well as that of the authority of scripture. It showed also a more conciliatory temper toward Luther in the section on the Lord's Supper.<sup>[3]</sup>

The opening chapter of the *Institutes* is perhaps the best known, in which Calvin presents the basic plan of the book. There are two general subjects to be examined: the creator and his creatures. Above all, the book concerns the knowledge of God the Creator, but "as it is in the creation of man that the divine perfections are best displayed," there is also an examination of what can be known about humankind. After all, it is mankind's knowledge of God and of what He requires of his creatures that is the primary issue of concern for a book of

theology. In the first chapter, these two issues are considered together to show what God has to do with mankind (and other creatures) and, especially, how knowing God is connected with human knowledge.

To pursue an explanation of the relationship between God and man, the edition of 1559, although Calvin claimed it to be "almost a new work," in fact completely recast the old *Institutes* into four sections and 80 chapters, on the basis of the Apostles' Creed,<sup>[3]</sup> a traditional structure of Christian instruction used in Western Christianity. First, the knowledge of God is considered as knowledge of the Father, the creator, provider, and sustainer. Next, it is examined how the Son reveals the Father, since only God is able to reveal God. The third section of the *Institutes* describes the work of the Holy Spirit, who raised Christ from the dead, and who comes from the Father and the Son to affect a union in the Church through faith in Jesus Christ, with God, forever. And finally, the fourth section speaks of the Christian church, and how it is to live out the truths of God and Scriptures, particularly through the sacraments. This section also describes the functions and ministries of the church, how civil government relates to religious matters, and includes a lengthy discussion of the deficiencies of the papacy.

## 3 List of editions

### 3.1 Latin

- Calvino, Ioanne (1536). *Christianae religionis institutio, totam fere pietatis summam, & quicquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium: complectens: omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus, ac recens editum: Praefatio ad Christianissimum regem Franciae, qua hic ei liber pro confessione fidei offertur* (in Latin). Basel: Thomam Platteru & Balthasarem Lasium.
- ——— (1539). *Institutio Christianae Religionis Nunc vere demum suo titulo respondens* (in Latin) (2nd ed.). Strassburg: Wendelinum Rihelium.
- ——— (1543). *Institutio Christianae Religionis Nunc vere demum suo titulo respondens* (in Latin) (3rd ed.). Strassburg: Wendelinum Rihelium.
- ——— (1550). *Institutio totius christianae religionis, nunc ex postrema authoris recognitione, quibusdam locis auctor, infinitis vero castigatio. Joanne Calvino auctore. Additi sunt indices duo locupletissimi* (in Latin) (4th ed.). Genève: Jean Girard.
- ——— (1559). *Institutio christianae religionis, in libros quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus novum haberi possit* (in Latin) (5th ed.). Genevae: Robert I. Estienne.

## 3.2 French

- Calvin, Jean (1541). *Institution de la religion chrestienne: en laquelle est comprinse une somme de pieté, et quasi tout ce qui est necessaire a congnoistre en la doctrine de salut* [Institution of the Christian Religion: in which is comprised a summary of piety, and almost all that is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation] (in French). Genève: Michel Du Bois.
- ——— (1545). *Institution de la religion chrestienne: composée en latin par Jehan Calvin, et translatée en francoys par luyesme: en laquelle est comprise une somme de toute la chrestienté* [Institution of the Christian Religion: composed in Latin by John Calvin, and translated into French by himself: in which is comprised a summary of all Christianity] (in French). Genève: Jean Girard.
- ——— (1551). *Institution de la religion chrestienne: composée en latin par Jean Calvin, et translatée en françoys par luyesme, et puis de nouveau reveuë et augmentée: en laquelle est comprinse une somme de toute la chrestienté* [Institution of the Christian Religion: composed in Latin by John Calvin, and translated into French by himself, and again revised & augmented: in which is comprised a summary of all Christianity] (in French). Genève: Jean Girard.
- ——— (1553). *Institution de la religion chrestienne: composée en latin par Jean Calvin, et translatée en françoys par luyesme, et encores de nouveau reveuë et augmentée: en laquelle est comprinse une somme de toute la chrestienté* [Institution of the Christian Religion: composed in Latin by John Calvin, and translated into French by himself, and yet again revised & augmented: in which is comprised a summary of all Christianity] (in French). Genève: Jean Girard.
- ——— (1554). *Institution de la religion chrestienne: composée en latin par Jean Calvin, et translatée en françoys par luyesme, et encores de nouveau reveuë et augmentée: en laquelle est comprinse une somme de toute la chrestienté* [Institution of the Christian Religion: composed in Latin by John Calvin, and translated into French by himself, and again revised & augmented: in which is comprised a summary of all Christianity] (in French). Genève: Philbert Hamelin.
- ——— (1560). *Institution de la religion chrestienne* [Institution of the Christian Religion] (in French). Genève: Jean Crespin.

## 3.3 German

- Calvin, Iohann (1572) [1572]. *Institutio Christianae Religionis, Das ist/Underweisung inn Christlicher Religion*. Heydelberg: Johannes Meyer.

## 3.4 Italian

- Calvino, Giovanni (1557). *Institutione della religion christiana di messer Giovanni Calvino, in volgare italiano tradotta per Giulio Cesare P* [Institutes of the Christian Religion by master John Calvin, translated into vulgar Italian by Giulio Cesare P] (in Italian). Translated by Giulio Cesare Paschali. Genève: François Jaquy, Antoine Davodeau & Jacques Bourgeois.

## 3.5 English

- Caluin, Iohn (1561) [1559]. *The Institytion of Christian Religion, vvyrtten in Latine by maister Ihon Caluin, and translated into Englysh according to the authors last edition*. Translated by Thomas Norton. London: Reinolde Vvolf & Richarde Harisson.
- Calvin, John (1813). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1. Translated by John Allen. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication.
  - ——— (1813). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2. Translated by John Allen. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication.
- ——— (1845). *Institutes of the Christian Religion; a New Translation by Henry Beveridge*. 1. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.
  - ——— (1845). *Institutes of the Christian Religion; a New Translation by Henry Beveridge*. 2. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.
  - ——— (1845). *Institutes of the Christian Religion; a New Translation by Henry Beveridge*. 3. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.
- ——— (1960) [1559]. *Institutes of the Christian Religion: in Two Volumes*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. ISBN 978-0-66422028-0.
- ——— (1959) [1536]. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (1536 ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. ISBN 978-0-80284167-4.
- ——— (2009) [1541]. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Elsie Anne McKee (1541 French ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. ISBN 978-0-80280774-8.
- ——— (2014) [1541]. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Robert White (1541 French ed.). Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth. ISBN 9781848714632.

## 4 See also

- [John Calvin bibliography](#)

## 5 References

- [1] “John Calvin”, *131 Christians everyone should know*, Christian History & Biography, Christianity today.
- [2] Schaff, Philip. “Calvin’s Place in History”. *History of the Christian Church*. VIII: Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation. Retrieved 2007-09-18.
- [3] One or more of the preceding sentences incorporates text from a publication now in the public domain: Benjamin Willis Wells (1920). "Institutes of the Christian Religion, The". In Rines, George Edwin. *Encyclopedia Americana*.

## 6 Further reading

- Battles, Ford Lewis and John Walchenbach, *Analysis of the “Institutes of the Christian Religion” of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980).
- Hurley, Michael. “The Church in Protestant Theology: Some Reflections on the Fourth Book of Calvin’s Institutes”, in *The Meaning of the Church: Papers of the Maynooth Union Summer School, 1965*, ed. by Donal Flanagan (Dublin, Ire.: Gill and Son, 1966), p. [110]–143. N.B.: The author is Roman Catholic.

## 7 External links

- *Institutes of the Christian Religion* at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library - available copy of text
- *Institutes of the Christian Religion* public domain audiobook at LibriVox
- Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, Translation by Henry Beveridge, Esq, London, 1599
- *An Epitome of the Institutions* by Caspar Olevianus
- Peddle, David (2008). “Intimations of Modernity: Freedom and Equality in Calvin’s *Institutes*” (PDF). *Animus*. **12**. ISSN 1209-0689. Retrieved August 18, 2011.
- Calvin '09 Conference
- Blogging the Institutes



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