

John Calvin and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Brief Biography

Birth and Education (1509-1536)

- Born: 10 July 1509 in Noyon, Picardy, France to a Roman Catholic family and a father who was employed in the Church.
- Educated to be a priest and then a lawyer (lawyers were concerned with church law) at various French universities, Calvin was attracted to humanism (classical education).
- On 1 November 1533 his friend, Nicolas Cop, gave an address at the College Royal calling for reform in the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin was believed to have written or helped write the address.
- After a year spent in hiding, Calvin fled France to Basel, Switzerland to join Cop. Basel was already a reformation city and a safe haven.
- In March 1536, while in Basel, he published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as a defense of the Protestant faith and basic primer for new Christians.

First Genevan Ministry (1536-1538)

- By August, after several moves, Calvin decided to move to Strasbourg on the French/German border. However, he had to make a detour through Geneva. Intending to stay just one night, he was met by William Farel, who begged him to stay in Geneva to help reform the church there.
- Calvin declined, preferring to study than to be a minister. When Farel could not change his mind, he shouted at him, "May God curse your studies if you leave the city of Geneva!"
- Calvin stayed.
- Calvin and Farel began the work of reformation, but it went badly and they were thrown out of the city shortly after Easter of 1538.

Strasbourg Interlude (1538-1541)

- Calvin then accepted an invitation from Martin Bucer in Strasbourg to come and minister there and settled into his new ministry in September of 1538.
- Second edition of the *Institutes*, 1539.
- Marriage to Idelette de Bure, Aug 1540.
- Calvin: "I, who have the air of being so hostile to celibacy, I am still not married and do not know whether I will ever be. If I take a wife it will be because, being better freed from numerous worries, I can devote myself to the Lord."
- Geneva invited Calvin to return – "Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over."
- Calvin returned. 13 Sept 1541.

Second Genevan Ministry (1541-1564)

- Idelette fell ill in 1545 and died in 1549, having borne one child prematurely who did not survive.
- Calvin: "I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life, of one who, if it has been so ordained, would willingly have shared not only my poverty but also my death."

During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.”

- Mary Tudor, Roman Catholic Queen of England, persecuted Protestants, driving them into exile in 1555. Many found refuge in Geneva under Calvin’s ministry, including John Knox, who led a congregation of English speaking exiles in Geneva.
- Knox eventually took the reformed faith back to Scotland.
- Died in Geneva on 27 May 1564.

Composition of the *Institutes*

- First Edition (Latin): 1536
- Second Edition (Latin): 1539
- First Edition (French): 1541
- Third Edition (Latin): 1543
- Second Edition (French): 1545
- Fourth Edition (Latin): 1550
- Third Edition (French): 1551
- Fourth Edition (French): 1553
- Fifth Edition (French): 1554
- Fifth and Final Edition (Latin): 1559
- Sixth and Final Edition (French): 1560

Resources on Calvin and the *Institutes*

1. Best English translation of the 1559 Latin edition: Ford Lewis Battles translation edited by John T. McNeill
2. Other editions worth owning: Ford Lewis Battles translation of the 1536 Latin edition.
3. Other helpful works on the *Institutes*: *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin by Ford Lewis Battles
4. Best Biography on John Calvin: *Calvin* by F. Bruce Gordon
5. Other helpful works of biography on Calvin: *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* by Robert Reymond