

# Calvin's *Institutes*, Book One

John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page.

Book One. The Knowledge of God the Creator

Book Two. The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel

Book Three. The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow

Book Four. The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein

## BOOK ONE. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THE CREATOR

### Chapter I. The Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves Are Connected. How They Are Interrelated

#### 1. *Without Knowledge of Self There Is No Knowledge of God* (1:35)

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” (1.35)

#### 2. *Without Knowledge of God There Is No Knowledge of Self* (1.37)

#### 3. *Man before God's Majesty* (1.38)

### Chapter II. What It Is to Know God, and to What Purpose the Knowledge of Him Tends

#### 1. *Piety Is Requisite for the Knowledge of God* (1.39)

#### 2. *Knowledge of God Involves Trust and Reverence* (1.41)

“Here indeed is pure and real religion: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law. And we ought to note this fact even more diligently: all men have a vague reverence of him; and wherever there is a great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed.” (1.43)

**Chapter III. The Knowledge of God Has Been Naturally Implanted in the Minds of Men**

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*(God Manifested in His Created Works, 1-10)*

1. *The Clarity of God's Self-Disclosure Strips Us of Every Excuse* (1.51)

“The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God.”  
(1.51)

2. *The Divine Wisdom Displayed for All to See* (1.53)

“Indeed, men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom.” (1.53)

3. *Man as the Loftiest Proof of Divine Wisdom* (1.54)

“Indeed, no one gives himself freely and willingly to God's service unless, having tasted his fatherly love, he is drawn to love and worship him in return.” (1.55)

4. *But Man Turns Ungratefully Against God* (1.55)
5. *The Confusion of Creature with Creator* (1.56)

6. *The Creator Reveals His Lordship over the Creation* (1.58)
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13. *The Holy Spirit Rejects All Cults Contrived by Men* (1.66)
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1. *God Bestows the Actual Knowledge of Himself upon Us Only in the Scriptures* (1.69)

“Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.” (1.70)

*(Two Sorts of Knowledge of God in Scripture)*

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3. *Without Scripture We Fall into Error* (1.72)

4. *Scripture Can Communicate to Us What the Revelation in the Creation Cannot* (1.73)

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3. *Augustine Cannot Be Cited as Counterevidence* (1.76)

4. *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: This Is Stronger than All Proof* (1.78)

5. *Scripture Bears Its Own Authentication* (1.80)

“Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated.” (1.80)

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*(Simplicity and Heavenly Character and Authority of the New Testament, 11)*

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*(Consent of the Church, and Fidelity of the Martyrs, 12-13)*

12. *Unvarying Testimony of the Church to the Scripture* (1.91)

13. *Martyrs Died Firmly for Scripture Doctrine* (1.92)

“Those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known.” (1.92)

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“We ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God.” (1.92)

3. *Word and Spirit Belong Inseparably Together* (1.95)

“For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.” (1.95)

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3. *Even Direct Signs of the Divine Presence Give No Justification for Images* (1.102)
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*(Pope Gregory's Error in This Refuted from Scripture and the Fathers, 5-7)*

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7. *The Images of the Papists Are Entirely Inappropriate* (1.106)

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2. *A Distinction Without a Difference* (1.118)
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**Chapter XIII. In Scripture, from the Creation Onward, We Are Taught One Essence of God, Which Contains Three Persons**

*(Terms Used in the Doctrine of the Trinity by the Orthodox Fathers, 1-6)*

1. *God's Nature Is Immeasurable and Spiritual* (1.120)
2. *The Three "Persons" of God* (1.122)
3. *The Expressions "Trinity" and "Persons" Aid the Interpretation of Scripture and Are Therefore Admissible* (1.123)

"We ought to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths shall be conformed. But what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly and on due occasion?" (1.124)

4. *The Church Has Regarded Expressions like "Trinity," "Person," etc., as Necessary to Unmask False Teachers* (1.124)
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"Father and Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but...they are differentiated by a peculiar quality." (1.126)

6. *The Meaning of the Most Important Conception* (1.128)

*(The Eternal Deity of the Son, 7-13)*

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29. *All Acknowledged Doctors of the Church Confirm the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1.158)

**Chapter XIV. Even in the Creation of the Universe and of All Things, Scripture by Unmistakable Marks Distinguishes the True God from False Gods**

*(Creation of the World and of Man, 1-2)*

1. *We Cannot and Should Not Go Behind God's Act of Creation in Our Speculation* (1.159)

“When a certain shameless fellow mockingly asked a pious old man what God had done before the creation of the world, the latter aptly countered that he had been building hell for the curious.” (1.160)

2. *The Work of the Six Days Shows God's Goodness Toward Men* (1.161)

*(The Angels, 3-12)*

3. *God Is Lord over All!* (1.162)

“The depravity and malice both of man and of the devil, or the sins that arise therefrom, do not spring from nature, but rather from the corruption of nature.” (1.163)

*(Creation and Functions of Angels, 4-12)*

4. *Also We Should Not Indulge in Speculations Concerning the Angels, But Search Out the Witness of Scripture* (1.163)

“Not to take too long, let us remember here, as in all religious doctrine, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety: not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters anything except what has been imparted to us by God's Word. Furthermore, in the reading of Scripture we ought ceaselessly to endeavor to seek out and meditate upon those things which make for edification. Let us not indulge in curiosity or in the investigation of unprofitable things.” (1.164)

**“The theologian's task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable.”** (1.164, emphasis added)

5. *The Designation of Angels in Scripture* (1.165)

6. *The Angels as Protectors and Helpers of Believers* (1.166)

7. *Guardian Angels?* (1.167)

8. *The Hierarchy, Number, and Form of the Angels* (1.168)

9. *The Angels Are Not Mere Ideas, But Actuality* (1.169)
10. *The Divine Glory Does Not Belong to the Angels* (1.170)
11. *God Makes Use of the Angels, Not for His Own Sake, But for Ours* (1.171)
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15. *An Irreconcilable Struggle* (1.174)
16. *The Devil Is a Degenerate Creation of God* (1.175)
17. *The Devil Stands Under God's Power* (1.175)
18. *Assurance of Victory* (1.176)
19. *Devils Are Not Thoughts, But Actualities* (1.178)  
*(The Spiritual Lessons of Creation, 20-22)*
20. *Greatness and Abundance of Creation* (1.179)  

“God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing.”  
(1.179-180)
21. *How Should We View God's Works?* (1.180)
22. *The Contemplation of God's Goodness in His Creation Will Lead Us to Thankfulness and Trust* (1.181)

**Chapter XV. Discussion of Human Nature as Created, of the Faculties of the Soul, of the Image of God, of Free Will, and of the Original Integrity of Man's Nature**

*(Man's Nature Deformed; Yet His Soul Bears, Though Almost Obliterated, the Image of God, 1-4)*

1. *Man Proceeded Spotless from God's Hand; Therefore He May Not Shift the Blame for His Sins to the Creator* (1.183)

“We cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge of ourselves is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were first created and what our condition became after the fall of Adam.” (1.183)

2. *Diversity of Body and Soul* (1.184)

3. *God's Image and Likeness in Man* (1.186)

4. *The True Nature of the Image of God Is to Be Derived from What Scripture Says of Its Renewal Through Christ* (1.189)

5. *Manichaeian Error of the Soul's Emanation* (1.190)

*(Opinions of the Philosophers on the Soul Criticized in View of the Fall of Adam, 6-8)*

6. *The Soul and Its Faculties* (1.192)

7. *Understanding and Will as the Truly Fundamental Faculties* (1.194)

8. *Free Choice and Adam's Responsibility* (1.195)

**Chapter XVI. God by His Power Nourishes and Maintains the World Created by Him, and Rules Its Several Parts by His Providence**

*(God's Special Providence Asserted, Against the Opinions of Philosophers, 1-4)*

1. *Creation and Providence Inseparably Joined* (1.197)

Otherwise, God would be a momentary Creator.

“But faith ought to penetrate more deeply, namely, having found him Creator of all, forthwith to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver—not only in that he drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion, but also in

that he sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow." (1.197-198)

2. *There Is No Such Thing as Fortune or Chance* (1.198)

God's providence is opposed to fortune and fortuitous events. Inanimate objects exercise the power of their properties only at the direction of God's ever-present hand. They are instruments of his purpose. E.g., the sun is the most forceful and glorious creature, but God provided light before he created the sun.

3. *God's Providence Governs All* (1.200)

God has a watchful, effective, active sort of omnipotence. God's governance is not enclosed within the stream of nature. God has ample power to do good, and all harmful things are subject to his will. Nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him.

4. *The Nature of Providence* (1.201)

Providence does not mean observation, but governance. It is more than bare foreknowledge.

(*"General" and "Special" Providence*)

God directs everything by his incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to his own end. But not only does God rule and watch over the universe; he also especially cares for each of his works.

(*Doctrine of Special Providence Supported by the Evidence of Scripture, 5-7*)

5. *God's Providence Also Directs the Individual* (1.203)

Calvin understands God to show favor and judgment within the natural order, e.g., rain and famine

6. *God's Providence Especially Relates to Men* (1.204)

Because creation was for the sake of humanity, so is providence. Nothing at all in the world is undertaken without God's determination. God cannot put off his office as judge, and his judgments are shown in human circumstances.

7. *God's Providence Also Regulates "Natural" Occurrences* (1.205)

No wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command. Earnest prayer for daily bread can be understood only in the sense that God furnishes us with food by his fatherly hand.

*(Discussion of Fortune, Chance, and Seeming Contingency in Events, 8-9)*

8. *The Doctrine of Providence Is No Stoic Belief in Fate!* (1.207)

Providence is not causal necessity. Instead, God is the ruler and governor of all things, carrying out his eternal decrees. There is no fortune or chance in human affairs.

“God's will is the highest and first cause of all things because nothing happens except from his command or permission.” (1.208) “Permission” is not meant to imply the intervention of an alien will.

Note: John Leith, in his Calvin Seminar, said that Calvin did not like the distinction of willing and permitting. Leith thinks it is a fundamental distinction and useful. But he admits that Calvin does not try to slip out of the problem. (1979-02-21)

9. *The True Causes of Events Are Hidden to Us* (1.208)

Certainly things appear fortuitous to us, yet we must not doubt that God's providence has authority over fortune. We look at the future as though it were contingent, though in our hearts we believe God has fixed it. Note this image: “God by *the bridle of his providence* turns every event whatever way he wills” (1.209, emphasis added). What for us seems a contingency, faith recognizes as a secret impulse from God.

**Chapter XVII. How We May Apply This Doctrine to Our Greatest Benefit**

*(Interpretation of Divine Providence with Reference to the Past and the Future, 1-5)*

1. *The Meaning of God's Ways* (1.210)

“Three things, indeed, are to be noted. First, God's providence must be considered with regard to the future as well as the past. Secondly, it is the determinative principle of all things in such a way that sometimes it works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary. Finally, it strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely.” (1.210)

“We must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of things.” (1.211)

2. *God's Rule Will Be Observed with Respect!* (1.212)

“Therefore no one will weigh God’s providence properly and profitably but him who considers that **his business is with his Maker and the Framers of the universe**, and with becoming humility submits himself to fear and reverence.” (1.212, emphasis added; i.e., “It is God with whom we have to do.” Cf. 1.691, 2.1255)

3. *God's Providence Does Not Relieve Us from Responsibility* (1.214)

We should inquire and learn from Scripture what is pleasing to God so that we may strive toward it under the Spirit’s guidance. There is nothing more profitable than knowledge of the doctrine of providence. But it does not make God responsible for crimes.

4. *God's Providence Does Not Excuse Us from Due Prudence* (1.215)

Solomon easily brings human deliberations into agreement with God’s providence. We are not hindered from looking ahead or planning. “For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care; he has provided means and helps to preserve it.” (1.216) It is our duty to protect our lives. “God’s providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed.” (1.216)

5. *God's Providence Does Not Exculpate Our Wickedness* (1.216)

Wickedness is not serving God’s will. God requires of us only what he commands. Even as God uses evil acts to carry out his judgment, this does not excuse the evildoer.

*(Meditating on the Ways of God in Providence: The Happiness of Recognizing Acts of Providence, 6-11)*

6. *God's Providence As Solace of Believers* (1.218)

Persuaded that all things happen by God’s plan, and that nothing takes place by chance, Christians will look to God as the principal cause of things, yet will give proper attention to secondary causes. God’s dealings are first with men, then with the other creatures. God has a special care for the well-being of believers.

7. *God's Providence in Prosperity* (1.219)

**“Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge.”** (1.219, emphasis added)

8. *Certainty About God's Providence Helps Us in All Adversities* (1.220)

God's hand can impress patience and peaceful moderation of mind upon us. **“When we are unjustly wounded by men, let us overlook their wickedness (which would but worsen our pain and sharpen our minds to revenge), remember to mount up to God, and learn to believe for certain that whatever our enemy has wickedly committed against us was permitted and sent by God's just dispensation.”** (1.220-221, emphasis added)

*9. No Disregard of Intermediate Causes!* (1.221)

Not only will the Christian regard those who help him as ministers of divine goodness, but he will also be grateful to them for their human kindness. As regard the future, the Christian will take counsel and assistance.

*10. Without Certainty About God's Providence Life Would Be Unbearable* (1.223)

“Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves: since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases—in fact holds within itself and fosters the causes of diseases—a man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped, as it were, with death. For what else would you call it, when he neither freezes nor sweats without danger? Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark on a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he has a sword perpetually hanging over his neck?” (1.223) This is the misery which man would feel if he were brought under the sway of fortune.

*11. Certainty About God's Providence Puts Joyous Trust Toward God in Our Hearts* (1.224)

The light of divine providence relieves and frees us from anxiety, fear, and care.

“Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.” (1.225)

Note: John Leith, in his Calvin Seminar, said of the doctrine of providence, “None more important for Christian piety, none more difficult to maintain today.” (1979-02-20)

*(Answer to Objections, 12-14)*

12. *On God's "Repentance" (1.225)*

God's "change of mind" is to be taken figuratively.

13. *Scripture Speaks of God's "Repentance" to Make Allowance for Our Understanding (1.227)*

God changes with respect to his actions. But his plan and will are not reversed.

14. *God Firmly Executes His Plan (1.227)*

### **Chapter XVIII. God So Uses the Works of the Ungodly, and So Bends Their Minds to Carry Out His Judgments, that He Remains Pure from Every Stain**

1. *No Mere "Permission"!* (1.228)

God does whatever he wills. E.g., though it appears that God gives permission to Satan to afflict Job, yet Job declares the truth, "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; as it has pleased God, so is it done." (1.229-230) E.g., Jesus Christ died not so much by the plots of men as by the plan of God.

2. *How Does God's Impulse Come to Pass in Men?* (1.231)

Man, while he is acted upon by God, yet at the same time himself acts. It is often by means of Satan's intervention that God acts in the wicked. "To sum up, since God's will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate to obedience." (1.232)

3. *God's Will Is a Unity* (1.232)

God's will is not at war with itself, nor does it change. But even though it is one and simple in him, it appears manifold to us, due to our mental incapacity. The light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable. A good man can will something against the will of God, and an evil man will something the same as the will of God, yet the former is more consonant with the will of God.

4. *Even When God Uses the Deeds of the Godless for His Purposes, He Does Not Suffer Reproach* (1.235)

While God accomplishes through the wicked what he has decreed by his secret judgment, they are not excusable.

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revised November 24, 2007