

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
June 2011

CH 414: “John Calvin and the Reformed Tradition”
Paul E. Capetz, instructor

Course description:

John Calvin (1509-1564) is the principal theologian in what has come to be called “the Reformed tradition” of Protestantism that is distinguished from Lutheranism, on the one hand, and the Radical Reformation of the Anabaptists, on the other hand. In the Anglo-American world, this tradition is best known as “Puritanism,” of which Presbyterianism and Congregationalism are its major ecclesial expressions.

The purpose of this seminar is for participants to attain a comprehensive understanding of Calvin’s theology through reading of selected passages from his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in its final version of 1559. In our discussions of the assigned readings we shall exegete this classic text with attention to its central themes, its systematic structure, and its historical context. Additionally, the seminar will raise questions regarding the significance of Calvin’s heritage for the church’s ministry, theology, and ethics in the contemporary world.

Course Requirements:

All participants in the seminar (including auditors) are required to complete the reading assignments for each meeting of the course and will be expected to take part in the discussion of the selected texts. Students taking this course for credit will also be required to write an essay on a topic of their choice (no more than 10 double-spaced pages due Monday September 12). A written proposal regarding your chosen topic (1-2 double-spaced pages) must be handed in to the instructor by Friday, June 17.

Required Text:

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1960).

Note on the *Institutes*:

The Latin title of the *Institutes* is *Institutio christianae religionis*. The word *institutio* is a singular noun (unlike the English translation “institutes”) meaning “instruction” or “education.” Hence, the meaning of the title is “Instruction in the Christian Religion.” The Latin word also means “disposition” or “arrangement” of material, so that Calvin’s title bears connotations of an ordered (systematic) presentation of his subject matter.

Note also that “religion,” not “theology,” is the subject matter of the book. What we today call “Christian theology” is, in Calvin’s vocabulary, designated as “the Christian

philosophy” to distinguish it from other ways of understanding human existence in the world, such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, etc. Properly understood, then, the Christian philosophy is the proper intellectual expression of the Christian religion, which Calvin also calls “piety.” Hence, he can also speak of his *Institutes* as a *summa pietatis* (“summary of piety”). Again, note the distinction in use of terms when compared to Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274) who called his major work *Summa theologiae* (“summary of theology”).

Since Calvin’s historical context is the Protestant Reformation(s) of the 16th century, what is at stake for him in the writing of this book is the proper understanding of the Christian religion. He sees himself fighting primarily against what he takes to be Roman Catholic distortions of Christian teaching or doctrine. But he also finds himself opposed to those Protestants who, in his opinion, have gone too far in the other direction (such as the Anabaptists and others included under the rubric of the “Radical” or “Left-Wing” of the Reformation). One more thing: although Calvin for the most part follows in the footsteps of Martin Luther (1483-1546), whom he called “the pathfinder,” there are two main places where Calvin’s teaching departs from Luther’s: 1) the so-called “third use” of the law, and 2) the doctrine of the Eucharist.

The *Institutes* went through many editions, beginning with the first edition of 1536 and culminating in its final, definitive form in 1559. The original edition was intended to be a straightforward statement of Protestant belief and was modeled after Luther’s catechisms. In its final version, however, it is explicitly designed as a textbook for ministerial students in order that they might learn how to preach the gospel correctly. Hence, when we attend to the various genres of theological literature produced by the Reformers, we must distinguish between “catechisms” and “confessions” (such as “The Heidelberg Catechism” or “The Westminster Confessions”), biblical commentaries and sermons, and textbooks in doctrine for ministerial students and preachers (today called either “dogmatic” or “systematic” theologies). In addition to the *Institutes* (which has often been described as “the first systematic theology of Protestantism” on account of Calvin’s attention to the question of the logical or most coherent arrangement of doctrinal statements), mention should also be made of Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), Luther’s associate in Wittenberg, who compiled his *Loci communes* (“common topics”) in 1521, which in its many editions served as the standard textbook of Lutheran theology. But Melancthon’s *loci* approach does not exhibit the systematic structure of the *Institutes*.

The 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is divided into four books:

Book I: The Knowledge of God the Creator

Book 2: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and then to Us in the Gospel

Book 3: The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow

Book 4: The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein

Each of the four books is divided in chapters, with each chapter subdivided into paragraphs. Hence, the standard method of citing a passage from the *Institutes* is according to book, chapter, and paragraph, e.g., *Inst.*, 1.3.2 (first book, third chapter, second paragraph). You will find this example on page 44 of the first of the two volumes of the McNeill edition. There you see that this paragraph is subtitled “Religion is no arbitrary invention.” It is important for you to understand, however, that these subtitles are not from Calvin’s own hand, but have been inserted into our English translation in order to help us find our way topically throughout the text.

When listing the reading assignments for each meeting of the seminar, I will give the book, chapter, and paragraph first, and then include the volume and page numbers of the McNeill edition in parentheses in case you get lost.

Course Schedule:

The seminar will meet regularly on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday 1:00-4:30 p.m. for three consecutive weeks (June 6-24, 2011). There will be a fifteen-minute break during each meeting of the seminar.

Monday, June 6: Introduction to the course, to each other, and to Calvin

Tuesday, June 7: Purpose, Genre, and Method of Calvin’s *Institutes*
“John Calvin to the Reader,” “Subject Matter of the Present Work,” and
“Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” *Inst.*, 1:3-31 (these texts are introductory materials and, as such, are not properly part of the *Institutes*; for that reason, they are cited here only according to volume and page numbers in the McNeill edition)

Thursday, June 9: The Knowledge of God the Creator according to Nature and Scripture
Inst., 1.1.1-1.10.3 (1: 35-99)

Friday, June 10: God’s Relation to the World (Creation and Providence)
Inst., 1:16.1-1.18.4 (1:197-237)

Monday, June 13: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in the Law and the Gospel
Inst., 2.6.1-2.8.55 (1:340-419), 2.9.1-2.10.5 (1:423-32), 2.11.1-2.11.14 (1:449-64)

Tuesday, June 14: The Image of God in Adam and its Restoration through Christ
Inst., 1.15.1-1.15.4 (1:183-90), 2.1.1-2.1.11 (1:241-55), 2.3.1-2.3.8 (1:289-301),
2.15.1-2.16.5 (1:494-508), 2.17.1-2.17.3 (1:528-31), 3.1.1-3.2.1 (1:537-44),
3.2.6-3.2.8 (1:548-53), 3.2.14- 3.2.16 (1:559-62), 3.3.1-3.3.12 (1:592-605)

Thursday, June 16: Self-Denial and the Christian Life
Inst., 3.6.1-3.10.6 (1:684-725)

Friday, June 17: Justification by Faith
Inst., 3.11.1-3.11.4 (1:725-29), 3.11.13-3.11.23 (1:743-54), 3.15.1-3.17-15
(1:788-820), 3.19.1-3.19.16 (1:833-49)

Proposals for final papers due

Monday, June 20: Election (or Predestination)
Inst., 3.21.1-3.24.17 (2:920-87)

Tuesday, June 21: The Church and the Ministry
Inst., 4.1.1-4.1.12 (2:1011-26), 4.3.1-4.3-16 (2:1053-68), 4.12.1-4.12.28
(2:1229-54)

Thursday, June 23: Sacramental Theology
Inst., 4.14.1-4.14.17 (2:1276-94), 4.15.1-4.15.16 (2:1303-16), 4.15.20-4.16.10
(2:1320-33), 4.17.1-4.17.5 (2:1359-65), 4.17.10-4.17.26 (2:1370-94)

Friday, June 24: Civil Government
Inst., 4.20.1-4.20.32 (2:1485-1521)

Monday, September 12: **FINAL PAPER DUE***

*Put your paper in my box at UTS or send to:
Paul Capetz
United Theological Seminary
3000 Fifth St. N.W.
New Brighton, MN 55112

Your paper must be postmarked on the due date (September 12, 2011). Please note: **I do not accept papers sent via e-mail.** If you wish to receive your paper back via U.S. mail, you must enclose a self-addressed stamped envelop with sufficient postage. Otherwise, put your UTS box # on the front of your paper and I will return it to your box at school.

In your paper you are free to select any topic within Calvin's theology that we have studied in the seminar (e.g., predestination, knowledge of God, the nature of the ministry, etc.). Your task consists in the following: 1) analyze Calvin's position on your chosen topic (i.e., make sure you are accurately depicting his views and the logical relation between its component parts); 2) explain the reasons he gives for his position and how he arrives at the position (e.g., what the Bible says, polemics against opponents, etc.); 3) state your agreement or disagreement with Calvin's position and why (i.e., are you arguing from a point of

view intrinsic to Calvin's theology or extrinsic to it?); and 4) state what you believe is at stake for the Christian faith in whatever position you adopt.