**Reformation 500 WEEK 15 John calvin’s Institutes**

After a long and difficult journey, fleeing France because of persecution, Calvin finally found rest in Basel Switzerland in January 1535. “There, he heard that many followers of the Reformation where still being burned alive in France” (S. Carr, *John Calvin*, 19).

To try to do something about it, Calvin published the first edition (only 6 chapters) of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in August 1535, when he was only 26 years old. After several revisions, the final edition published in 1559 had 80 chapters; and had become, as Calvin intended, a manual to “instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word” (Preface, 1559).

Calvin addressed the *Institutes* to the Roman Catholic king of France, Francis I, pleading with him to put an end to the unjust persecution of his French countrymen, who were being falsely accused of wanting (like the Anabaptists in Munster) to abolish all laws and overthrow civil government. Calvin wanted to prove that these allegations were not true, and to show all people what the Reformed Church really stood for.

In the Preface, Calvin answers all the main Roman Catholic objections to the Reformation. The Catholics call our doctrine ‘new.’ They ask what miracles have confirmed it. They ask whether it is right to disagree with the church fathers and tradition. They want us to admit that our doctrine is divisive since it has given birth to so many different churches and factions, and so many violent disturbances.

First, the only reason why our doctrine seems to be new is because the true gospel has been buried for a long time on account of man’s ungodliness. But God by His goodness has restored the true gospel to us. In demanding miracles of us, they act dishonestly. We are not inventing some new gospel, but are holding on to that very gospel which has already been confirmed by all the miracles that Jesus Christ and His apostles did.

Scripture, *not* the church fathers or tradition, is the ultimate authority. Indeed, it is possible for the majority of people to be wrong, as was the case in the days of Noah. If the contest were to be determined by the church fathers, “the tide of victory…would turn to our side.” For example, the church fathers condemned images of Christ, and argued that priests should be allowed to marry. The Catholics are wrong to claim they are the true church. It is clear from Scripture that “the church can exist without any visible appearance [like the 7000 who did not bow to Baal];” and that when it is visible its mark is not outward magnificence but rather “the pure preaching of God's Word and the lawful administration of the sacraments.” Did not the visible church (scribes and Pharisees) err when they decided to crucify Christ? Lastly, Elijah, who was accused of being a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17), “taught us what we ought to reply to such charges: it is not we who either spread errors abroad or incite tumults; but it is they who contend against God's power [I Kings 18:18].” Should the apostles “have deserted the gospel because they saw that it was the seedbed of so many quarrels, the source of so many dangers, the occasion of so many scandals?”

Calvin scholar John T. McNeill called the Institutes a masterpiece, which “holds a place in the short list of books that have notably affected the course of history, molding the beliefs and behavior of generations of mankind.”

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