

## 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 were 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 [1 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?"

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## REFORMATION 500 WEEK 15: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, QUESTION 37-39

**Question 37:** What do you understand by the word *suffered*? **That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race; in order that by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.**

Questions 37-44 explain the biblical basis of article 4 of the Apostles Creed: “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell.” We begin with the word “suffered.” From the moment of His birth to the hour of His death, Jesus Christ suffered all the miseries and weaknesses of our humanity, except for sin (Heb. 4:15). He hungered, thirsted, was fatigued, and afflicted with sadness and grief. “He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). His most bitter anguish of soul was on the cross, where He suffered the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. It was this that caused Him to cry out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (Matt. 27:46). “Christ suffered... according to the human nature only, both in body and soul; for the divine nature is immutable, impassible [*incapable of suffering or feeling pain*], immortal, and life itself, and so cannot die” (Ursinus, 215). Christ suffered and was forsaken in His humanity in the place of humanity, so all who believe in Him will never be forsaken.

**Question 38:** Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge? **That He, being innocent, might be condemned by the temporal judge, and thereby deliver us from the severe judgment of God, to which we were exposed.**

Jesus Christ suffered the grossest injustice under Pontius Pilate, because Pilate officially declared Him innocent (“I find no fault with this man”), but then condemned Him to die by crucifixion! This was God’s plan (John 19:11), so that it might be perfectly clear that Jesus Christ was condemned to die – *not for his own sins, but for the sins of all who would believe in Him*. The innocent was declared guilty so that the guilty might be declared innocent, as it says in 1 Peter 3:18: “Christ has suffered once for sins, *the just for the unjust*, that He might bring us to God.”

**Question 39:** Is there anything more in His having been crucified than if He had suffered some other death? **Yes, for thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay upon me, because the death of the cross was accursed of God.**

It was necessary for Jesus Christ to die by crucifixion (being nailed to a cross made of two pieces of wood), because it was an Old Testament curse for a criminal’s dead body to be hung on a tree; as a warning to others that “he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut. 21:23). If Jesus had died in some other way, then “His death would not have been counted as *accursed of God, a punishment for sin* on behalf of you and me” (Jones, *Study Helps*, 87). “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, *Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*)” (Gal. 3:13). Christ’s accursed death on the cross saved us from God’s eternal curse upon sin!

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