

Happy 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday, John Calvin!  
(July 12, 1509-May 27, 1564)  
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As I've often said, if I were banished to the proverbial desert island and could only take one book besides my Bible, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* would be my choice. Calvin's grasp of the majesty and holiness of God, along with his biblical insight into the sinfulness of the human heart, have helped me immensely in my own walk with Christ. That's what the *Institutes* is all about. The opening sentence is, "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" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], edited by John McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 1:35). As McNeill points out (1:36, note 3), "These decisive words set the limits of Calvin's theology and condition every subsequent statement."

In the opening section, Calvin makes the point that we must see our own need for God before we will diligently seek Him. He writes (1:36-37),

Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God. Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves. For what man in all the world would not gladly remain as he is—what man does not remain as he is—so long as he does not know himself, that is, while content with his own gifts, and either ignorant or unmindful of his own misery? Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.

Calvin goes on throughout Book 1 to expound on what it is to know God. Book 2 deals with Christ the Redeemer. Book 3 is about how the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of Christ to believers. And Book 4 deals with the church and human government. Throughout he lifts up God's greatness, majesty, and holiness, along with His tender fatherly care, as the incentives to a godly life. For example, he writes (1:41),

I call "piety" that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.

Keep in mind that Calvin was born a Catholic into a world that was Catholic, where Christianity was generally a superstitious bunch of rituals, but not a personal relationship with God through Christ. When you read him, you must keep in mind the world in which he lived, which was quite different than our world. You cannot explain the man apart from the Holy Spirit's powerful work of conversion and sanctification in him. He was a remarkable man from whom everyone aspiring to true godliness can learn much.

If you want to get acquainted with Calvin, I'd recommend first the short biography by his younger co-worker and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza. He knew Calvin firsthand. He also responds to and refutes many of the common attacks made against Calvin, which continue to our day. T. H. L. Parker's *John Calvin* [Lion] is also short and helpful. The recent, *John Calvin, A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology* [Reformation Trust], edited by Burk Parsons, is an easy-to-read introduction both to Calvin's life and his thought. Here are Beza's words about Calvin at his death: "We can truly say that in this one man God has been pleased to demonstrate to us in our day the way to live well and to die well" (p. 118). "He possessed the Spirit of God in such large measure that sinners could never hear him without trembling, nor good men without loving and respecting him" (p. 120). Do yourself a favor this year and read both Calvin's life and some of his teaching!