



Increase Faith Within Us Rediscovering Calvin for the Church Today

By Dr. Gordon S. Mikoski
Assistant Professor of Christian Education
Princeton Theological Seminary

You are invited to join a global community reading through Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 2009. Book IV, as outlined below, focuses on the church, the sacraments, and civil order, so you may find it helpful to share your study with a small group. Dedicated resources, including the text and weekly reflections with questions, are available online at www.ptsem.edu/calvin2009.

In this 500th anniversary year of the birth of John Calvin, Presbyterian groups today can find many reasons to appreciate anew what this pastor-theologian had to say in his magnum opus *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* on a wide range of subjects crucial to Christian belief and practice: the stunning revelation of God as Trinity; the central role of scripture as the instrument of illumination by the Holy Spirit; the breathtaking beauty of creation and the wonderful achievements of human culture; God's ongoing involvement in the world and in particular human lives; the amazing love of God made known in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the subtle work of the Holy Spirit to justify sinners through the gift of faith; the shape of the Christian life; and the mystery of election. Calvin's relevance as a resource for congregational leaders today can also be seen in his insightful and biblically grounded teachings about the church. In Book 4 of *The Institutes*, Calvin speaks powerfully to us about "the external means or aims by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein." With a focus *on* the church, Book 4 is best read *by* the church, together, in community. Let us briefly look at what is to be gained by reading Book 4 and how it might "increase faith within us."

In the first half of Book 4, Calvin addressed questions concerning the purpose and shape of the church as well as its appropriate leadership and proper authority:

- The chapters of this section of Book 4 lay the groundwork for the distinctively Reformed and Presbyterian way of thinking about, practicing, and embodying what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ—an understanding that must be distinguished from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and various radical Protestant visions of the church.
- He identified criteria for discerning authentic and vital Christian communities and, in so doing, provided the groundwork for much of the impetus for the modern ecumenical movement.
- He articulated a compelling biblical vision of the proper relationships among:
 - the risen Jesus Christ,
 - the Bible as the church's sacred and normative text,
 - the church,
 - and the witness of the church in society.

- In this first half of Book 4, he also put forward the vision, unique in all of Christianity, of an ordained laity—spiritually mature members of the church who would be set apart for lives of service as deacons and governing elders. Here we also find a compelling vision for those among the baptized who should be set apart for a life of service to the church through preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments.
- Calvin’s vision of church order and leadership laid the groundwork for the distinctive connectional form of government found in all Reformed and Presbyterian churches.
- This same vision also inspired the pattern of organization for several national and international ecumenical bodies.
- One can even readily see several lines of influence from Calvin’s vision of the church to several foundational principles of American government.

In the latter half of Book 4, Calvin taught about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as means of divine grace that sustain and nourish faith. With precision and nuance, Calvin carefully explained the relationship between:

- the ascended Jesus Christ,
- the subtle work of the Holy Spirit,
- and the church.

The daily pattern of the Christian life is baptismal in character—dying to sin and being raised to newness of life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Christians are called and empowered by God to live eucharistically—receiving grace that issues forth into lives of grateful obedience. Perhaps most exciting and controversial of all, Calvin turned the traditional teachings of Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and other Protestants about the Lord’s Supper upside down.

The final section of Book 4—on the relation of the church to the civil authority—continues to be some of the most politically explosive theological literature ever written. The very end of Book 4 packs a surprise punch, one that has inspired multiple political upheavals and revolutions in history. It is by no means an accident that early in the American Revolution the British referred to the upheaval in North America as “The Presbyterian Revolt.”

More than an afterthought to teachings about God the Creator and God the Redeemer found in Books 1–3, Book 4 brings everything together in the life of the church and breaks new and still relevant ground for Christians, particularly those in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. This final and longest book in *The Institutes* still speaks powerfully today to all those who seek to serve the Lord in and through the church.