



JOHN CALVIN

A LITTLE BOOK
ON THE
CHRISTIAN
LIFE

“What does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ? How can you be heavenly minded and yet do much earthly good? Calvin addresses these practical questions and more in this excerpt from his classic, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I love this little book, and heartily endorse this judiciously translated and edited printing that makes Calvin even more accessible to the modern reader.”

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“We are living in a golden age of Christian publishing. Readers are being served with new works written here in the twenty-first century and, perhaps even more importantly, with classics from days gone by. This booklet is one of those classics, and I’m grateful to Aaron Denlinger and Burk Parsons for allowing today’s Christians to rediscover it. I pray that it blesses us just as it blessed many of our forebears.”

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TORONTO

“I have often thought, ‘I would love to retranslate for the twenty-first century the life-shaping material in Calvin’s *Institutes* book 3, chapters 6–10,’ and I’ve done nothing! But now, Burk Parsons and Aaron Denlinger have done the job for us all. We owe them a big thank you, because every Christian needs to have a working knowledge of this little book.”

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“The smooth and pleasant Latin Calvin wrote has found a just as smooth and pleasant translation in this wonderful little book. That sure is an accomplishment and will help many to enjoy even more the timeless message this treasure contains.”

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“Calvin’s treatment of the Christian life in book 3 of his *Institutes* is a treasure. For more than five hundred years, Christian believers have profited from the clear way in which Calvin describes the Christian life of self-denial and cross-bearing in union with Jesus Christ. Reformation Trust Publishing’s fresh translation of this Christian classic is a most welcome addition to earlier publications of Calvin’s masterful description of life in conformity to Christ.”

—DR. CORNELIS P. VENEMA

PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF DOCTRINAL STUDIES,
MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY
DYER, IND.

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**TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
AARON CLAY DENLINGER
AND BURK PARSONS**



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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I offer my heart to you,
O Lord, promptly and sincerely.

JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)

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P R E F A C E

THE TEACHING ON the Christian life in this book is extracted from John Calvin's most famous theological work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin's *Institutes* underwent multiple editions during his own lifetime, with each one incorporating substantial addition to the work. The first edition of the work appeared in 1536, roughly one year after Calvin's flight from France for the safer haven of the Swiss town of Basel. Calvin was twenty-seven years old with merely several years of self-study in theology under his belt when the *Institutes* first appeared, a fact often rehearsed to demoralize middle-aged, aspiring theologians or browbeat younger ones into greater productivity. Yet the first edition of the *Institutes* was only a bare outline of what the work would become as it was tweaked and increased by the Reformer over the next two decades. That first edition contained only six chapters covering the basics of the Christian faith, in contrast to the eighty chapters divided into four books that would constitute the final Latin edition of Calvin's work in 1559.

The first edition of the *Institutes* promised in its full title a “complete summary of piety” in addition to “whatever is necessary to be known in doctrine.” To all appearances, the young Reformer soon realized that he had promised more than he had delivered in the work. In 1539, he published a second and substantially expanded edition of the *Institutes* that “now at last,” its revised name promised, “truly answered to its title.” For our purposes, the most intriguing addition to this second edition was the chapter titled *De vita hominis Christiani* (On the life of a Christian man). This chapter included in relatively mature form all that Calvin would say about the Christian life in subsequent editions—both Latin and French—of the *Institutes*.

The value of this chapter “on the life of a Christian man” as a treatise in its own right, independent of its larger context in the *Institutes*, was quickly realized after the publication of the 1539 *Institutes*. In 1540, a Parisian Huguenot (and future martyr)

by the name of Pierre de la Place translated the chapter into French, one year before Calvin completed his first French edition of the entire *Institutes*. De la Place's translation never saw publication, though it circulated widely enough to secure a place on the University of Paris's Index of Prohibited Books several years later. In 1549, an English translation of the chapter by Thomas Broke, a largely unknown English Reformer, was published in London under the title *Of the Life or Conversation of a Christian Man*. This, intriguingly, was more than a decade before a complete English edition of Calvin's *Institutes* appeared in print.¹

Calvin authorized an independent Latin edition of his work on the Christian life in 1550, the

1 More detailed historical information on the publication history of Calvin's work on the Christian life can be found in David Clyde Jones, "The Curious History of John Calvin's Golden Booklet of the Christian Life," *Presbyterion* 35/2 (2009): 82–86. Pierre de la Place's martyrdom is described in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (London: Knight and Son, 1854), 204–6.

same year that a fourth Latin edition of the *Institutes* appeared. The title of that independent Latin treatise, which translates as “A distinguished little book on the life of a Christian man” (*De vita hominis Christiani, insigne opusculum*), was probably decided by the publisher, but is notable because it very likely served as the basis for the much later Dutch and English designations of Calvin’s work on the Christian life as the “Golden Booklet.”

The 1550 *De vita hominis Christiani, insigne opusculum* was published in Geneva, which Calvin called home from 1541 until his death in 1564. Geneva likewise served as the base for stand-alone publications of Calvin’s work on the Christian life in French (*Traicte tres excellent de la vie Chrestienne*) in 1550 and 1552 and for the publication of his work on the Christian life in Italian (*Breve et utile trattato de la vita de l’huomo christiano*) in 1561, prior—as was the case in English—to the publication of a complete Italian translation of the

Institutes. All subsequent early modern renditions of Calvin's work on the Christian life, no matter the language, would be incorporated into print runs of his entire *Institutes* (of which there were many), with the possible exception of one further English translation and publication of the independent work in 1594.

The mid-nineteenth century, however, would see renewed interest in translating and publishing Calvin's work on the Christian life as an independent treatise. In 1857, a Dutchman named Petrus Georg Bartels published a German translation of Calvin's work on the Christian life titled *Büchlein vom Leben eines Christenmenschen* (Booklet on the life of a Christian man). Successive Dutch translations of Bartels' German rendering of Calvin's work followed in 1858 and 1859 under the title *Johannes Calvijn's gulden boekse, over den regt christelijken wandel* (John Calvin's Golden Booklet concerning right Christian walking).

The twentieth century witnessed multiple Dutch printings and editions of the *Gulden Boekeske* (1906, 1938, 1950, and 1983). Given the popularity that Calvin's work on the Christian life came to enjoy as an independent treatise in twentieth-century Dutch Reformed circles, it's unsurprising that it was a Dutchman who produced in 1952 an English version of Calvin's work on the Christian life under the title *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*. The Dutchman in question, Henry Van Andel, immigrated to America in 1909, and served as professor of Dutch language, literature, and culture at Calvin College from 1915 to 1950. Van Andel's work, however, was no mere English translation of its Dutch counterparts of similar title. It was, rather, a fresh translation of Calvin's work on the Christian life from the definitive Latin (1559) and French (1560) editions of the *Institutes*. Van Andel's work would eventually see multiple editions, and would itself—rather

curiously—be translated from English into multiple other languages.

More recent translations of Calvin's work on the Christian life have been made. In 2002, Elsie Anne McKee, professor of Reformation studies and the history of worship at Princeton Theological Seminary, included substantial extracts from Calvin's work on the Christian life in an anthology of Calvin's writings on pastoral piety. And in 2009, the Banner of Truth Trust produced a new translation of Calvin's work on the Christian life—based on the final French edition of the *Institutes* and completed by Robert White—under the title *A Guide to Christian Living*.

Nevertheless, Van Andel's translation remains the standard edition of Calvin's work on the Christian life as an independent treatise. That fact may seem curious to those who compare Van Andel's translation to Calvin's original work in Latin or French, or even to the relevant chapters in one of

the better-known English translations of Calvin's entire *Institutes*. Despite his stated intention, in the preface to his work, of adhering to the original text "as closely as possible," Van Andel took considerable liberties with Calvin's text, both in terms of form and content. With regard to form, Van Andel subdivided Calvin's own paragraphs into discretely numbered sections, often producing, in that process, grammatically awkward paragraphs of merely one or two sentences and, even more problematically, obscuring the flow of Calvin's argument. With regard to context, Van Andel's work too often reads more like a paraphrase of Calvin than a proper translation. Van Andel, by his own testimony, sought to retain Calvin's "meaning," but to render that meaning in "imaginative language." In the end, however, comprehensibility and colorfulness seem to trump faithfulness to Calvin's original in his translation. With all due deference to Van Andel's intention, then, we concur with the late

Calvin scholar T.H.L. Parker who, with reference to Van Andel's work, observed that anyone wishing "to know and understand Calvin on the Christian life will be well advised not to attempt it by way of this edition."²

Consequently, we believe the church will be well served by a new translation of Calvin's work on the Christian life—a translation based principally upon the final and definitive Latin edition of Calvin's *Institutes*. Our aim in completing this project has generally been to produce a translation that we believe Calvin himself would have been pleased with. We have, in other words, aimed at faithfulness not just to Calvin's meaning but, so much as possible, to his own words. We have, however, also striven to make Calvin's meaning as clear as possible to English readers. Our efforts in this regard have

2 T.H.L. Parker, "Review of John Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, trans. by H.J. Van Andel," in *Evangelical Quarterly* 24 (1952): 185–86.

required us to break some of Calvin's lengthier sentences into shorter ones, to introduce more frequent paragraph breaks than Calvin's work contains, and to replace some pronouns with their stated antecedents to maximize clarity. We have also consistently opted for English equivalents to Latin words and phrases that are familiar to English speakers, even if that at times meant bypassing an obvious English derivative or cognate of a Latin word.

The very close and deliberate reading of Calvin's words on the Christian life that this project required from us was more rewarding than either of us could have anticipated. Translation sessions regularly evolved—or perhaps devolved—into lengthy discussions of discrete points made by Calvin about the realities of Christian living. Amid those discussions, Calvin often seemed to be more of a living conversation partner than the dead and buried author of the text before us. We hope that others, in reading this work, will experience Calvin

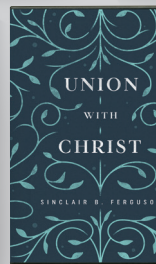
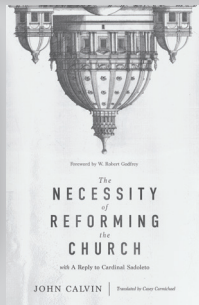
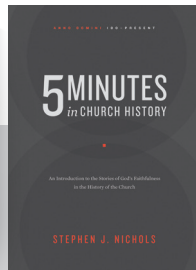
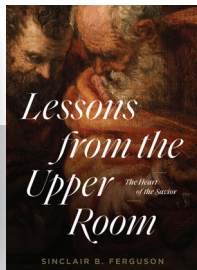
PREFACE

conversing with them—comforting and exhorting them—as powerfully as we did as we labored on it.

We wish, finally, to express our gratitude to Thomas Brewer for his invaluable editorial insight and assistance in the production of this book. Without his help, this book would not be what it is.

—AARON CLAY DENLINGER AND BURK PARSONS

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