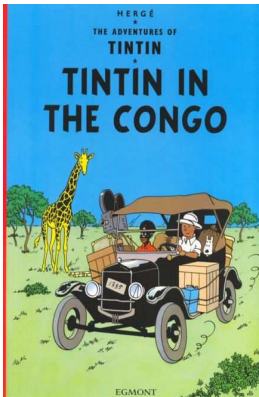


RCC Library Newsletter

August 2010

Editor: Anna Tooze



What's New in the Library?

The whole Tin-Tin series is *now available* in the children's library, located in Eden in the downstairs hallway. Don't miss it!

Institutes of the Christian Religion I & II By John Calvin (Ed. John T. McNeil)

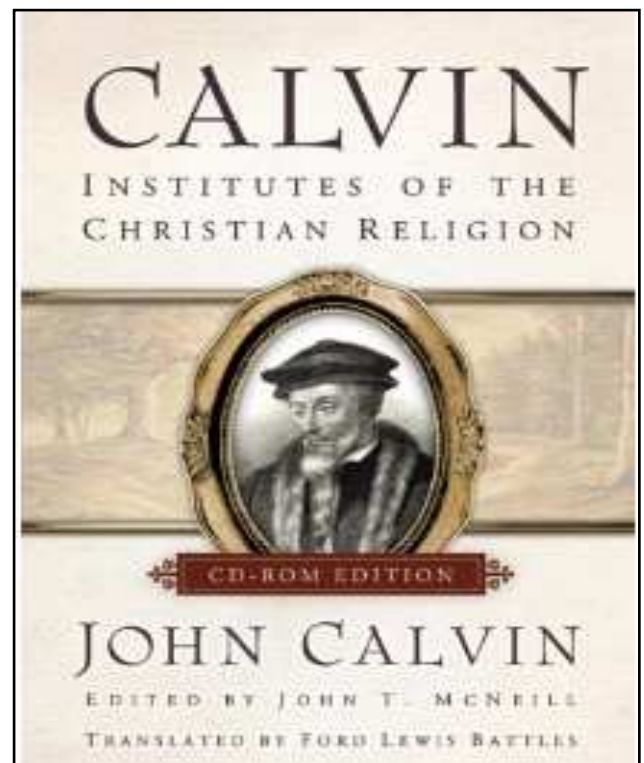
I had three purposes for checking out Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from our church library:

- (1) To use the work as an aid to teaching my children about Reformation thought in history
- (2) To study carefully his logic applied to the similarities of OT circumcision and NT baptism
- (3) To solidify my beliefs in foundational Christian doctrines in the face of my children's questioning and the solidifying of the tenets of the faith in their own lives.

These three purposes were fulfilled in reading and studying Calvin's work. However, rather than discuss this, I'd like to share something different: the ways in which reading John Calvin's words destroyed misperceptions I had of him and reinforced in me the importance of personal study of God's doctrine.

In reading Calvin's own words, I found I was struck over and over again by his tenderness, his understanding of the human condition and his thoughtful expression of the overwhelming magnitude of Christ's redemptive work. Like many people, I knew of Calvin only what others had told

me. I'm afraid I thought of him as a severe, perhaps pinch-faced, intellectual stoic, with little patience for any of the foolishness that seems to permeate most of the humanity with whom I'm familiar. After reading him, I found I was greatly mistaken. I was reminded of the importance, when reasonable, to study the words of great thinkers ourselves, rather than rely solely on the opinions of others. When we allow others to summarize and categorize important ideologies without looking into them ourselves, we are in danger of ceding a tremendous amount of power that comes from personal knowledge, with many unintentional consequences. The example of the Bereans is one we should weigh carefully; be cautious in accepting others' synopses when we may be much better served to study ourselves to determine how a man's thinking compares with Scripture.



It is well known that Calvin's *Institutes* are widely regarded as the most important work ever written on the foundational principles of the faith. In reading his well thought-out, logical treatise, I was not surprised to find that it was, indeed, the most important work I'd ever read concerning key doctrines of Christianity. What did surprise me was the discovery of the spirit of the man underlying the words he wrote. For example, his humility shines throughout. In his "Prefatory Address to King Francis," he shows his honor of civil authority by dedicating the work to the King, acknowledges the high office of the King, and communicates his desire that what he writes will be of great benefit and use to the King. He discusses himself modestly as well. For example, when discussing the Lord's Supper he devotes a section to the theme that his thoughts and words are inadequate to capture the mystery of the bread and wine as Christ's body and blood: "I therefore freely admit that no man should measure [the mystery's] sublimity by the little measure of my childishness. Rather, I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth."

The words Calvin chose to use whenever speaking of the work of Christ show a deep love, gratitude and joy in its sufficiency. In discussing a false doctrine he was fighting concerning essential righteousness, Calvin discusses Paul's words in Romans 7 with excitement and thoughtfulness (italics added): "Speaking of his own [Paul's] real righteousness, or the uprightness that had been given him...he mournfully exclaims: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? (Rom 7:24). But *fleeing to that righteousness* which is founded solely upon God's mercy he *gloriously triumphs* over both life and death, reproaches and hunger, the sword and all other adverse things." And, when speaking of righteousness through Christ, his words express our total dependence upon Him:

"But Scripture, when it speaks of faith righteousness, leads us to...turn aside from the contemplation of our own works and look solely upon God's mercy and Christ's perfection. Indeed, it presents this order of justification: to begin with, God designs to *embrace the sinner* with his pure and freely given goodness, finding nothing in him except his miserable condition to prompt Him to mercy, since he sees man utterly void and bare of good works; and so he speaks in himself the reason to benefit man. Then God *touches the sinner* with a sense of his goodness in order that he, despairing of his own works, may ground the whole of his salvation in God: mercy." Calvin is far from a dry, detached pietistic scholar as he carefully explains the faith.

Calvin's understanding of mercy and the frailty of us all is also demonstrated within his work. In speaking of participation in the Lord's Supper, he is not a harsh exclusionist, but states: "Surely the devil could find no speedier means of destroying man than by so maddening them that they could not taste and savor this food with which their most gracious Heavenly Father had willed to feed them. In order, therefore, not to rush headlong to such ruin, let us remember that this sacred feast is medicine for the sick, solace for sinners, alms to the poor; but would bring no benefit to the healthy, righteous and rich – if such could be found...For it is a sacrament ordained not for the perfect, but for the weak and feeble, to awaken, arouse, stimulate and exercise the feeling of faith and love, indeed, to correct the defect of both."

The reading of Calvin's *Institutes* was very valuable in increasing my knowledge of the Word, doctrine and of the character of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Seeing the character of Christ – His humility, His mercy, His compassion – in Calvin's writing caused his careful, scholarly work to make a deeper impression on me than I had anticipated. I highly recommend utilizing these volumes for scholastic research of the faith as well as inspiration to more carefully follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

--Review by Peggy Erland

If you have any questions about the church library please contact Alice Barnard (alice@dranrab.com) or Dan Drinkwater (who is available on Sunday afternoons or at Drinkwat@hotmail.com).

If you or your child are interested in writing reviews on material in our church library, please contact Anna Tooze (annabanana171@hotmail.com or in person at church). Thank you!