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DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE



JOHN CALVIN,
A LITTLE BOOK ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

A Little Book from a Big Book

John Calvin (1509–1564) never intended to write a little book on the Christian life. His life-long project was to write a *big* book on the Christian life. In the course of five editions over two decades, he composed his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This is not a sum of theology but a sum of piety: a set of four books on the Christian life. In the subtitle of the final edition, the *Institutes* sought to embrace “almost the whole sum of piety and whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: a work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety.”

Following Paul’s claim that truth is in order to godliness, Calvin insists that we cannot truly know God without the accompaniment of piety. “For, properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety” (1.2.1). Later in that paragraph Calvin offers this definition of piety: “that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires.”

The second, third, and fourth editions of the *Institutes* ended with a chapter entitled, “The Life of the Christian Man.” In the final edition, this material was organized into five chapters, 6–10, in book three (the benefits we receive from Christ) as Calvin expanded the work to include a fourth book, essentially on the doctrine of the church. It is these five chapters (book 3, chapters 6–10 of the 1559 *Institutes*) that compose *A Little Book on the Christian Life*. The *Little Book*, then, consists of a section of a very big book. The chart [attached] shows the evolution of the *Institutes* and the reshaping of its contents over the course of the five editions.

Development of the Institutes

First Edition (1536): 6 chapters

Second Edition (1539): 17 chapters

Third Edition (1543): 21 chapters

Fourth Edition (1550): 21 chapters

Fifth and Final Edition (1559): 80 chapters in four books

Calvin scholars have focused on this section of the *Institutes* as a key for understanding the Reformer. B. B. Warfield wrote, “If you would know the man, how he lived with and for God and the world, read first of all in the *Institutes* the section, *On the Life of the Christian Man*. It is a portrait of himself.”[1]

At the same time, it must be underscored how far from exhaustive is the *Little Book* in Calvin’s complete picture of the Christian life. There are many vital aspects of the Christian life that go unmentioned. For example, there is no discussion of election, what Calvin considers the ground and source of the Christian life. There is no reference to prayer, which elsewhere (3.20) Calvin describes as the “chief exercise of faith.” There is little about the church, to which Calvin devotes nearly the entirety of book four. Although almost no attention is devoted to the Holy Spirit, book 3 introduces the “Benefits of Christ” by describing the “secret working of the Spirit working faith in us.” A study of the *Little Book* must always locate it in the context of the *Institutes* as a whole, and you may want to refer to the larger work from time to time in your discussions.

The *Little Book* versus the *Golden Book*

The editors’ introduction to *A Little Book* refers to a similar title, published by Baker Publishing House in 1952, called *The Golden Booklet on the True Christian Life*. This translation by Henry Van Andel (1882-1968), a professor of Dutch language and literature at Calvin College, was a popular edition of this same section from the *Institutes* for over half a century. For many reasons the *Little Book* is a vastly superior book, both in translation and layout, than the *Golden Booklet*, and we are indebted to Ligonier Ministries for this new edition. To see the contrast between these two translations, one needs go no further than the beginning of each book.

The *Golden Booklet* opens in this way:

“The goal of the new life is that God’s children exhibit melody and harmony in their conduct. What melody? The song of God’s justice. What harmony? The harmony between God’s righteousness and our obedience.

“Only if we walk in the beauty of God’s law do we become sure of our adoption as children of the Father.”

Here is how the *Little Book* translates the same passage:

“The goal of God’s work in us is to bring our lives into harmony and agreement with His own righteousness, and so to manifest to ourselves and others our identity as His adopted children.”

In the former, we find 56 words in six sentences over two paragraphs. In the latter, 34 words in one sentence. The earlier book is really a paraphrase that takes considerable liberties with the original Latin. The *Little Book*, in contrast, seeks to preserve Calvin’s rhetorical style: *Brevitas et facilitas* (brevity and simplicity).

Eugene Peterson describes the Institutes in these words: “Spirituality includes the mind, the thinking mind, attempting to follow and respond to the mind of God as well as his heart. Calvin’s heart was on fire, but his mind was clear. This is some of the keenest theology ever written, but written, every word of it, by a pastor in the middle of a parish of rather unruly sinner-Christians.”[2] It is well to remember that Calvin is writing as a minister of a congregation and to put the matters he discusses in the context of his pastoral ministry. If you want to familiarize yourself with the life of Calvin, several biographies are listed in the bibliography below.

Calvin Timeline

1509	Born in Noyon, France
1535	Publishes first edition of <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>
1536	Arrives in Geneva
1538-41	Expelled to Strasbourg
1539	Publishes first commentary (on Romans)
1540	Marries Idelette de Bure
1541	Returns to Ministry in Geneva
1542	Only child born and dies
1549	Death of Idelette
1559	Becomes citizen of Geneva
1559	Establishes the Academy of Geneva
1559	Publishes fifth and final edition of Institutes
1564	Dies in Geneva and buried in unmarked grave

Bibliography

Biographies of Calvin

Gordon, Bruce. Calvin. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Gordon is widely recognized as the best of many biographies of Calvin.

Two shorter works that would be profitable reading are:

Godfrey, W. Robert. John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor. Wheaton: Crossway, 2009.

Selderhuis, Herman J. John Calvin: A Pilgrim’s Life. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009.

Studies of Calvin on the Christian Life

Calvin, John. The Christian Life. Ed. by John Leith. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.

Donnelly, Edward. “The Christian Life” pp. 397-424 in *John Calvin: For a New Reformation*, ed by Derek W. H. Thomas and John W. Tweeddale. Wheaton: Crossway, 2019.

Edgar, William. “Ethics: The Good Life According to John Calvin” pp. 320-346 in *Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. by David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008.

Horton, Michael S. *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014.

Leith, John H. *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989.

Niesel, Wilhelm. *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. By Harold Knight. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. (Chapter 10 is on "The Life of the Christian Man.")

Partee, Charles. *The Theology of John Calvin*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

Wallace, Ronald S. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959.

The arrangement of *A Little Book* is simple. The key themes of this book, in order of treatment are:

1. Call of the Christian Life
2. Self-denial
3. Cross-bearing
4. Meditation on the Future Life
5. Right Use of the Present Life

This discussion leader's guide is divided into a three-part study of *A Little Book*.

First Month: Chapters 1 and 2 (The Call of the Christian Life and Self Denial)

Second Month: Chapters 3 and 4 (Cross-Bearing and Meditation on the Future Life)

Third Month: Chapter 5 (The Right Use of the Present Life)



1ST MONTH

Chapters 1 & 2

It might be helpful to begin your discussion by asking who among your group has read much of the *Institutes*. For those for whom this is a first exposure to Calvin, you might want to extend the challenge to read more. A helpful way to approach the *Institutes* in a bite-sized way is to follow a reading program through the course of an entire year. One such reading plan can be found here:

<https://chapellibrary.org:8443/pdf/books/rcii.pdf>

It is important to remember that the *Little Book* finds Calvin in mid-argument. You may want to begin the discussion by locating this section within the *Institutes* and to review what precedes and follows its contents. Most importantly, the Holy Spirit is discussed at the beginning of Book 3, as Calvin goes to great length to describe the nature of faith and the manner in which it is awakened in the believer by the Spirit.

Also note that Calvin's discussion of the Christian life *precedes* his section on justification by faith. This is a strange arrangement given his claim that justification is the "main hinge on which religion turns." He goes on to argue that "unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God" (3.11.1).

Chapter 1: Scripture's Call to Godly Living

The *Little Book* leads off with the calling of the Christian life. The Christian life is not optional for the Christian. "Nominal Christians" are not Christians; rather, they have a false and offensive knowledge of God. Doctrine is no mere matter of the tongue; it must bear fruit. Here Calvin makes a point that he will echo throughout the book: we must make daily progress in the school of Christ. The challenge of progress in the Christian life is raised several times in this little book. You will notice that it finds expression in every chapter:

- "None of us will move forward with so little success that we will not make some daily progress in the way." (16)
- "This is great progress in the Christian life – that we nearly forget ourselves ... and devote our energies to God and His commands." (24)
- "Believers ... make progress toward humility and, shedding their perverse confidence in their flesh, cast themselves on the grace of God." (62)
- "No one has made much progress in the school of Christ who doesn't look forward joyfully both to his own death and the day of his final resurrection." (104)

- “Those who keep this rule [patient endurance] have made much progress in the school of our Lord.” (121)

But as William Edgar observes, this progress is not “starting from scratch”; it is a consequence of our adoption. To progress in the Christian life for Calvin is to become what we are in Christ. In Edgar’s words, “we strive *from* this identity, and not *unto* it” (Edgar 323).

Calvin identifies “Four Holy Foundations of the Christian Life”:

1. Christ has cleansed us, symbolized in our baptism.
2. Christ has engrafted us into his body.
3. Christ has ascended into heaven: our life is hid in Christ in heaven.
4. Christ, by His Spirit, has consecrated us as temples of God.

For each of these four foundations, he describes a corresponding consequence for the Christian life:

1. Because Christ has cleansed us, we are not our own: we must deny the self.
2. Because Christ has engrafted us into his body we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection.
3. Because Christ has ascended into heaven, we should yearn for heaven where our life is hidden in Christ.
4. Because Christ has consecrated us as temples, we must use this world wisely, lest we pollute the temple of God.

Here Calvin is adumbrating the material in the chapters to follow: self-denial, cross-bearing, meditation on the future (heavenly) life, and the right use of the present life.

Take note of Calvin’s rhetoric here and throughout the book. He speaks very frankly about the human condition. Among his vivid descriptions are laziness (3), foolishness (60), stubbornness (67), and stupidity (89).

Chapter One Discussion Questions

- What do you find most striking about Calvin’s prose?
- What was radical about Calvin’s call of the Christian life in his day? How is this a radical idea in our day?
- What might be the significance of the order in which Calvin on the Christian life appears in the Institutes? Why do you think Calvin put this section on the Christian life before justification?
- Why does Calvin insist on an extensive contrast between Scripture and the philosophers?
- How does Calvin distinguish progress from perfection?

Chapter 2: Self-Denial

Calvin begins this chapter with something that may sound like a surprising claim: Christians have an “even more precise rule” for the Christian life than the law. He locates that precision in Romans 12. From here he develops two consequences for progress in the Christian life: first, the doctrine of union with Christ, which enables us to engage in “forgetting ourselves (22, 24), and secondly, the importance of obedience.

Calvin does not introduce a new concept here, but he distances himself from medieval notions of self-denial. The philosophers [here Calvin has in view the Stoics] assert that we should live “according to nature,” Calvin notes. “Scripture, however, draws its encouragement from the true fountain” (8). Conformity to Christ is not the same as accordance with nature. Michael Horton explains:

“In medieval piety, self-denial was the fast track to the saving blessing of the beatific vision. This is why monks took a vow of poverty and celibacy. Calvin also recognizes that self-denial lies at the heart of the Christian life. Yet he begins this section by counseling us to take our cues not from moral philosophy but from the gospel, which ‘shows that God the Father, as he has reconciled us to himself in his Christ, has in him stamped for us the likeness to which he would have us conform.’” (Horton 251)

In outlining the doctrine of self-denial, Calvin leans on Titus 2:11-14, which exposes two obstacles to this progress: ungodliness and worldly desires. As Ronald Wallace writes, “the self constitutes the first and most continuous and most baffling problem that every Christian has to face” (Wallace 58).

Self-denial, Calvin goes on to describe, points in two directions: to God and to neighbor. He concentrates his discussion on the latter, urging readers to see their neighbor’s vices as small and their own vices as large. Self-denial seeks the good of others. The Christian life does not exalt the freedom of the individual at the expense of the church. Wallace writes: “It is within the church that the individual finds himself truly sanctified and separated from the world. Loyalty to the membership and fellowship of the church is an important part of Christian duty.” (Wallace vii).

Chapter Two Discussion Questions

- What are the distinguishing characteristics of Calvin’s doctrine of self-renunciation?
- How does Calvin connect self-denial to the image of God?
- What are the counterfeit forms of self-denial that Calvin exposes?

2ND MONTH

Chapters 3 & 4



Chapter 3: Cross-bearing

Self-denial leads to suffering, and Calvin takes suffering right to the cross, the ultimate expression in self-denial. Christ's life was a "perpetual cross," and his sanctification in life, death, and resurrection, fulfilled his royal priesthood for his people. Because we are united to Christ in his suffering and glory, there is no avoiding the cross: "we cannot escape this destiny." Christ's suffering had one purpose: to demonstrate his obedience to the Father. But our suffering has several purposes: it humbles us; it produces endurance, character, and hope; it is training in obedience; and it restrains us from sin. Here, Calvin stresses the discipling function of bearing the cross. Ronald Wallace explains:

"Calvin gives several closely-connected reasons why it should be necessary for the people of God to be constantly afflicted by the Cross. The experience of affliction under the Cross enables us to mortify the flesh and destroys self-confidence and self-love. No matter how much a man has learned to trust not in himself but in God alone, nevertheless when fortune smiles too much upon him he tends (like even David), to indulge himself in his prosperity and to develop a sense of carnal security which depends more upon his inward feelings and his outward condition than on the Word of God. Under such circumstances, a man seeing that his condition is better than that of many others is apt to persuade himself that his life is 'privileged above the common lot of the world.' Thus he indulges in pride and forms an 'overweening opinion of his own virtue.' ... To indulge in pride is, according to Calvin, to indulge in self-love, which is the very opposite of self-denial. It is the experience of the Cross which destroys this 'depraved confidence in the flesh.' Suffering ... tames the fierceness of our pride and destroys our self-love. In the experience of humiliation, learning to distrust ourselves, we also learn to transfer our confidence and love to His grace." (Wallace 76)

It is helpful to remember the ways in which Calvin bore the cross in his ministry.

1. He was a refugee from France and for a time exiled from Geneva.
2. He was betrayed by friends, reviled by enemies.
3. He struggled with childlessness.
4. He suffered chronic illnesses throughout his life.

Cross-bearing shapes for Calvin a Protestant understanding of martyrdom (79-80). Calvin, who had close acquaintance with martyrdom as a French refugee, saw the testimonies of martyrs as vital. Most of his students at the Academy in Geneva were martyrs (in fact, the average life expectancy of a graduate was 18 months, because they tended to go as missionaries to Roman Catholic lands like France). But he refused to glorify the martyrs.

Union with Christ is our only consolation in our sorrow. And that union will produce the fruit of suffering, whereby “bitterness of the cross” is “tempered by spiritual joy” (85).

Chapter Three Discussion Questions

- How is a disdain for cross-bearing a repudiation of Christ himself?
- How does Calvin describe cross-bearing as a blessing and comfort?
- How does Calvin contrast patience under the cross with stoic resignation?

Chapter 4: Meditation on the Future Life

Building from the previous chapter, Calvin connects the cross-bearing with the vision of eternity in two ways. First, the painfulness of the cross must startle us out of our obsession with this life and direct our gaze to heaven. Secondly, looking forward to the life to come will ease the burden of carrying the cross.

Throughout this chapter Calvin has instructed us on the proper way to view the world: with scorn (93), as worthless (92), and with contempt (95). He stops short, however, of instructing us to hate this world. Hatred is a wrong form of contempt (95). To reject the goodness of the world is to express disdain for God’s good gifts. Like all of his gifts, we should receive the goodness of creation with gratitude, but only if we allow it to prepare us for the world to come and not distract us on our journey. Thus, he calls for a proper regard for the world: without it, disaster ensues in the Christian life.

On page 92, Calvin engages in a discussion about the value of cemeteries. Reminders of death serve to underscore the emptiness of this present life. “If we pass by a funeral or walk among graves, then – because our eyes are confronted with the image of death – we eloquently philosophize on the emptiness of life.” But “it vanishes as soon as we turn our backs and leaves us without a trace in our memory.”

The aches and pains of our mortal flesh should stir us up to meditate on “the termination of this present life” and to “have death constantly before our eyes.” “Christ’s death is the gate of life.” Can we believe this without meditating on our future life? Such meditation will draw profitable contrasts between the future life and the present life: strife vs. peace, order vs. chaos, and permanence vs. transience.

This, in turn, should shape our view of death and dying. While death is an unpleasant subject, the consolation of Christ should conquer it. Death is but our escape from exile and our way home. Thus, we should come to think of death in joyful terms.

“To sum up everything in a word,” Calvin writes, “The cross of Christ finally triumphs in believer’s hearts – over the devil, the flesh, sin, and the wicked – when their eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection.”

It may seem curious that, in his call for meditation on the future life, Calvin presents no discussion of the nature of heaven or the character of the world to come. Likely, Calvin would have regarded such reflection as speculation rather than meditation, and he warned often about the danger of unhealthy speculation. Elsewhere in the Institutes (I.14,1), Calvin borrows a story from Augustine about a wise man who is asked, “What was God doing before He created all things?” Calvin quotes Augustine’s answer to that question by saying, “He was making hell for the curious.” Calvin regards this as a good response to an irreverent question that should not be taken seriously. Calvin seems to be applying that thinking here: we should not speculate about any details regarding our future eschatological life; rather, we should honor the silence of Scripture.[3]

Chapter Four Discussion Questions

- How does Calvin connect meditation on the future life with assurance of salvation?
- How does Calvin distinguish humanity from animals?
- How does Calvin’s anthropology resemble or differ from Plato’s view?



3RD MONTH

Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Right Use of the Present Life

Calvin warns of a double danger: a mistaken strictness and a mistaken laxity. To avoid both a severe asceticism and unbridled self-indulgence, he concludes with principles that would assure the believer's right use of the present life:

1. Moderation in all things
2. Patient endurance
3. Stewardship
4. Calling

Calvin knew the burden of calling. In a letter he wrote to Guillaume Farel, who urged him to return to Geneva in 1541 (after the two were banished from the city in 1538), Calvin expressed his reluctant agreement to return in the language of calling:

“Had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord...And for myself, I protest that I have no other desire than that, setting aside all consideration of me, they may look only to what is most for the glory of God and the advantage of the Church.”

It may be helpful to contrast Calvin's sense of calling from modern notions of career. One is a means of self-denial (Calvin emphasized that calling, above all, served to restrain us from sin). The other is a means of self-fulfillment (“be all that you can be”).

What do we make of Calvin's *Little Book*? Is Calvin a dualist? A fundamentalist? Does he sound less culturally ambitious than contemporary voices in the Reformed faith? Some observers have identified contradictions in his teaching on the Christian life. Others have discovered in the *Little Book* a deeper consistency that finds patterns in his own experience. Herman Selderhuis describes Calvin's own earthly journey in this way:

“Calvin runs the race of this life, falling all the while, picking himself up again and again, and looking forward to the finish, which he calls ‘the reflection of the life to come.’ The race wears him out, often seeming to pointlessly bring him back to the place he started, and yet there remains something to look forward to. Calvin stays on the course in faith that the God who makes the race so difficult also secures the runner's finish.” (Selderhuis 7)

Chapter Five Discussion Questions

- Wilhelm Niesel writes: “in Calvin’s opinion it is impossible to speak about the Christian life without at the same time referring to the freedom of the Christian.” While Calvin turns explicitly to Christian liberty later (3.19) in the *Institutes*, where does it implicitly appear in the *Little Book*?
- How is Calvin conservative and progressive in his doctrine of vocation?
- Where does Calvin not sound like the Calvin you expected? Do you find an unfamiliar Calvin in this brief book? How does your understanding of Calvin’s theology come under reconsideration from your reading?
- For those who also read Augustine’s *Confessions*, what sounds familiar and what sounds different? Why might that be the case?
- What seem to be Calvin’s biggest pastoral concerns regarding the Christian life? Do these remain our big threats today or are other challenges now more pertinent? Why or why not?

Notes

[1] B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. E. D. Warfield et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 5:26.

[2] Eugene Peterson, *Take and Read: Spiritual Reading, an Annotated List* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 5.

[3] He does occasionally offer slightly more detail in his biblical commentaries when the future life is exegetically pertinent. The Apocalypse is one of the few books on which he does not preach or comment, however, thus reducing his biblical exposition where it might be most notable regarding this topic.