TH 712 — Theology of Calvin’s Institutes  

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Office Hours: Mondays, 4:30–7:30; Tuesdays, 1:30–4:30. Make an appointment or just stop by (scheduled appointments have priority).

Course Description

Long considered a theological classic, John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion was read as an authoritative expression of Reformation Christianity in his own day, and it continues to be regarded as one of the most important texts of Protestant thought today. This course provides students an opportunity to critically engage the whole of Calvin’s 1559 edition of the Institutes. The text will be studied with a focus on both its historical context in the sixteenth-century Reformation, and on its enduring spiritual power to speak to the life, faith and ministry of the contemporary church.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course you will have:

- Cultivated the life of the mind in your own relationship with God through critical engagement with the thought of a great Protestant theologian.
- Become more familiar with the content of Calvin’s theology as expressed in the Institutes, his use of Scripture and tradition, and the important theological issues that are addressed.
- Gained a better understanding of the place and impact of Calvin’s theology on the Protestant Reformation, and on the subsequent development of the Reformed faith in the modern and contemporary Christian church.
- Evaluated the key themes and viewpoints of Calvin’s theology with both an understanding of the controversies and an appreciation of the value of his insights for contemporary Evangelicalism, and for your own theological reflection and development.
- Gained a deeper appreciation of your own theological heritage and your place in the community of faith that transcends the boundaries of time and location; and a clearer vision and intellectual context for a lifetime of theological study that is expressed in continuing personal growth, and well-informed and articulate ministry.

Required Course Texts


Recommended Optional Texts


Requirements (Choose either OPTION #1 or OPTION #2)

**OPTION #1: Research Paper**

A **15 page** paper researching any topic of interest to the student that is also clearly relevant to the theology of John Calvin. The Research Paper should demonstrate significant engagement with both primary and secondary sources. These sources should be clearly identified in the footnotes or endnotes, and bibliography. Required course texts (Hall and Parker) may be used for the research paper as well.

Research papers will be evaluated on 1) thoroughness, conciseness, and clarity of thought; 2) demonstrated significant and thoughtful critical engagement with the topic under consideration, and with the primary and secondary sources; and 3) the quality of writing and presentation.

The Research Paper will be **due on December 22 by 4:00 pm**.

**OPTION #2: Reading Response Essays**

Three **five page** essays responding to three different passages in Calvin’s *Institutes* (each passage may include one or more key sections within a chapter, a complete chapter, a number of pages that follow a theme or issue over multiple chapters). Please clearly indicate the pages you are addressing at the beginning of each essay (a title is not necessary, but your first paragraph should clearly state the focus of the essay).

Each essay must be a *response* to the reading, rather than a *summary* or *explication*. Students should seek to analyze and evaluate the chosen passage as a whole, reflecting on the exegetical support, theological cogency, or practical significance of a key theme, argument, issue, criticism, or an important point Calvin makes that is of particular personal interest. Students should consult Scripture, as well as additional primary and/or secondary sources to aid in this analysis, and these sources may include, but not be limited to the required texts (Hall and Parker). These sources should be clearly identified in the footnotes or endnotes, and bibliography.

The essay will be evaluated on: 1) thoroughness, conciseness, and clarity of thought; 2) demonstrated significant, thoughtful, critical engagement with the reading; and 3) the quality of writing and presentation.

The Reading Response Essays are **due October 19/20, November 16/17, and December 22 by 4:00 pm**.

The following examples of general critical questions may help guide your engagement with the reading and the formulation of your response:

- What stands out to me? (Reflecting on interest)
- What surprises me? (Reflecting on distance)
- What puzzles me? (Reflecting on learning opportunities)
- What connections do I make? (Reflecting on integration)
- What implications are there? (Reflecting on application)
**OPTION #1 and OPTION #2 (Required of All Students):**

*Ten Reaction Papers*

Nine 1 page papers reacting to the course reading are required. These papers are less formal than the Reading Response Essay described under Option #2, but should follow the same guidelines and general critical questions for the purpose of reflecting on the reading and bringing a prepared contribution to the class discussions. The paper should be written as a collection of statements or glosses (comments, interpretations, questions, criticisms, etc.). Each paper must respond to the required primary reading due for that week.

A Reaction Paper will be **due each week of the course beginning with week 2.**

A final 1 page reaction paper will be due at the end of the course. This last paper should be written as a short essay. Students will apply the critical questions above to reflect on their study of the whole of the *Institutes*. This essay will be an opportunity to formulate a final assessment of the value of studying this text for the contemporary church and for your own life and ministry.

This final Reaction Paper will be **due on December 22 by 4:00 pm.**

**Additional Information Concerning Written Assignments**

- Written assignments should be typed in 11-12 point, Times New Roman-type font, approximate double spacing (not more), at most 1 inch margins, and with a cover page that clearly states your campus mailbox number. Students should make consistent use of a style manual of their choice.

- The preferred means of submitting assignments is in hard copy at the beginning of class, in my campus mailbox (#223), or slipped under/deposited in the box in front of my office door (GL108). Please submit assignments as an email attachment only when absolutely necessary, and do not assume the instructor has received an emailed assignment until a verification is sent in response. Late assignments will normally not be accepted. Exceptions will be subject to a grade reduction penalty.

**Participation/Laptops and Personal Recorders**

You are expected to be faithful to your calling as a student through preparation, attendance, and involvement in the course. Significant learning will take place in the context of the classroom community. Students will be evaluated on their timely completion and thoughtful engagement with each reading assignment and their participation in each class discussion.

**The use of laptop computers and personal recorders will not be permitted during class.**

**Grading**

The relative weight of the course requirements will be distributed as follows:

- Reaction Papers (Total of 10) 40%
- OPTION #1 — Research Paper 60%
- OR OPTION #2 — Reading Response Essays 60% (20% each)

**Plagiarism**

Helpful guidelines on plagiarism can be found on the Indiana University website listed below. This document has the official recognition of the Gordon-Conwell faculty and provides very helpful tools to guide you as you prepare your papers/exams. In order to save paper, we have provided you with the website address: [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html).
Course Schedule and Topic Outline

A DETAILED READING SCHEDULE WILL BE DISTRIBUTED BEFORE THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS.

WEEK ONE
- Course Introduction;
- Overview of the Life and Work of John Calvin;
- Introductory Material

WEEK TWO
- Knowing God and Ourselves;
- God Revealed in Creation;
- The Bible and the Holy Spirit

WEEK THREE
- Idolatry and the Trinity;
- The Created World and Humanity as Created;
- God’s Sovereign Providence

WEEK FOUR
- Original Sin; How God Works in the Human Heart;
- The Place of the Law; Exposition of the Moral Law

WEEK FIVE
- Relation between the Old and New Testaments;
- The Person of Jesus Christ;
- The Redemptive Work of Jesus Christ

WEEK SIX
- Saving Faith; Regeneration and Repentance;
- The Christian Life: Self-Denial;
- The Christian Life: Bearing Our Cross and Attitude toward This Life

WEEK SEVEN
- Justification by Faith;
- The Value of Our Good Works;
- The True Nature of Christian Freedom; Prayer

WEEK EIGHT
- Election and Reprobation;
- Predestination and the Final Resurrection

WEEK NINE
- The True Church; The Roman Church and the Christian Ministry;
- The Authority of the Church; Church Discipline

WEEK TEN
- The Sacraments in General;
- Baptism and Infant Baptism;
- The Lord’s Supper; Civil Government

IMPORTANT DATES:

10/12–16; 11/9–13 — Reading Weeks

10/19 (HA) or 10/20 (HB) — Reading Response Essay #1 Due (OPTION #1)

11/16 (HA) or 11/17 (HB) — Reading Response Essay #2 Due (OPTION #1)

12/7 (HA) or 12/8 (HB) — Snow Day

12/22 — Reaction Paper #10 and
- Reading Response Essay #3 (OPTION #1) or Research Paper (OPTION #2) Due by 4:00 pm.