



Birmingham Theological Seminary  
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HT 1390: Special Topic in Church History: Calvin's Institutes

**Semester:** Fall 2025

**Day & Time:** Monday, 7:30-9:30

**Professor:** Kirk Summers

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**Course:** HT 1390 Institutes

**Room:** A201

**Credits:** 2

**Phone:** (205) 454-1391

**Course Description:** This course will introduce Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, an influential landmark of reformed theology. We will be tracing the evolution of the work through numerous editions up to 1559 and placing the work in the context of Calvin's life. We will also treat the work as an artefact of Church history by examining the theological debates of his day, which inform much of the arguments in the *Institutes*, as well as looking at the intellectual and social milieu in which the work arose.

### Course Objectives:

- The student will be able to recall a basic outline of the *Institutes* and explain the historical forces and impulses that brought the work into existence
- The student will be able to identify and describe the theological controversies, heresies and social pressures that inform the *Institutes*
- The student will apply and adapt the social issues dealt with in the *Institutes* to modern realities (e.g., whether Calvin's conception of Church discipline and social control is viable in or adaptable to the American experience)
- The student will demonstrate an ability to use the *Institutes* as an aid in Biblical exegesis and even homiletics

### Required Texts:

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.), trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. by John T. McNeill (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960). ISBN 13: 978-0664220280.
- ThM Students (only): Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford, 2001).

### Collateral or Recommended Texts:

- John Calvin, *On the Christian Life: A New Translation*, trans. by Randy Blacketer (Crossway, 2024).

- Anthony N.S. Lane, *A Reader's Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (Baker Academic, 2009).
- Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017).

### Course Requirements and Assessments:

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|-----------------------------------|-----|
| • Theological writing assignment  | 30% |
| • Exegesis application assignment | 30% |
| • Final exam                      | 40% |

### ThM Students Assessments:

- |                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| • Theological writing assignment  | 15% |
| • Exegesis application assignment | 15% |
| • Main paper                      | 30% |
| • Book summaries                  | 10% |
| • Final exam                      | 30% |

### Writing Assignments

1) Write a 5-page paper on Calvin's rebuff of the distinction made in some quarters between *worship* of God and *service* to saints (see 1.11.11-12). What are the origins of this distinction and what are Calvin's arguments against it? Do other theologians argue against this distinction with any arguments different from those of Calvin? Finally, how would you respond to a person who defends this distinction? Your brief response should aim to convince and not rebuke (or overwhelm).

2) Write a 5-page paper addressing the following: Why did Calvin have to raise the issue of "Christian liberty" in the *Institutes*? Given that he wrote the *Institutes* to instruct Christians, can you identify his target audience for this section (3.19)? What do his answers reveal about their beliefs? Are there any Christian groups who hold to similar libertine positions today who could benefit from Calvin's arguments?

3) For ThM students only: At *Institutes* 2.2.12-21, Calvin discusses the value of non-sacred knowledge for the Christian. Should Christians engage in the reading of pagan literature (and to what extent?) or imitate its style? And what about their engagement with the plastic arts? How far should Christians delve into humanistic learning? Write a 20-25 page paper in which you first look at the state of the question (i.e., what have scholars determined Calvin's attitude toward the liberal arts to be?) and second analyze the position of Calvin for yourself while being sensitive to the historical context of the *Institutes* as Muller discusses them in the *Unaccommodated Calvin*. Remember that Calvin is treating a theological matter when he talks about the arts, so that will inform your understanding of what he says. Do you think that scholars have properly considered this context? If Calvin were alive today, how do you think Calvin would assess the arts and their value for Christians? In other words, can Christians read secular works for enjoyment and edification?

4) ThM students only: Read Richard Muller's book *The Unaccommodated Calvin* and turn in ½ page summaries of each chapter as noted on the syllabus. In grading these, I will be looking for evidence that you read the content thoughtfully and critically.

### **BTS Format, Style, and Writing Standards:**

All research papers must be formatted in accordance with Turabian Chicago standards including the title page. All papers are to be #12 font Times New Roman and Double-Spaced. Any paper not conforming to these standards will automatically be dropped one letter grade. Please see the BTS Turabian Style Guide for more information on turning in papers and assignments.

The BTS Turabian Style Guide and other resources are available on the BTS Writing Center webpage: <https://www.btswritingcenter.net/>

In addition, the Writing Center runs 2-3 Writing Workshops every semester. They are very helpful and highly recommended.

### **BTS Plagiarism / Generative AI Policy**

In addition to the BTS plagiarism policy, BTS is implementing a new Generative AI policy. Unless clearly directed by the instructor, the students should submit their own work, independent of artificial intelligence tools. Use of generative AI to write papers or to write significant portions of assignments is considered an ethical violation of our Student Code of Conduct and to be a violation of general academic integrity, which could result in a zero on the assignment and/or a lowered letter grade for the course by the professor. If determined to be an egregious violation, it could lead to further sanctions administered through the Academic Committee, including expulsion from BTS.

### **Course Schedule:**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>CLASS OUTLINE</b>	<b>ASSIGNMENT</b>
September 8	The story of the <i>Institutes</i> ; Preface	Preface: Paragraphs 1, 3–4, 6
September 15	Knowing God and ourselves ThM: Summary of chapter one of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	1.1–4
September 29	God revealed in creation ThM: Summary of chapter two of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	1.5.1–4, 1.6–15
October 6	Idolatry and the Trinity ThM: Summary of chapter three of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	1.11.1–5, 11-12 1.13.2–3, 6–7, 16–20
October 13	The created world and humanity as created ThM: Summary of chapter four of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	1.14.13–18, 20–22; 1.15.1–4, 7–8

October 27	Original sin ThM: Summary of chapter five of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	2.1.1–3, 6, 8–10 2.2.7, 12, 15, 18, 22 2.3.3–5 (Note: 2.12-21 contains an interesting discussion on the value of the arts and sciences)
November 3	Christian freedom <b>Paper 1 due</b> ThM: Summary of chapter six of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	3.19.1–5, 7–15
November 10	Predestination and the final resurrection ThM: Summary of chapter seven of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	3.24.4–8, 15–17 3.25.1–3, 6, 10, 12
November 17	The Roman Church and the Christian Church ThM: Summary of chapter eight of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	4.2.1–2, 9–12 4.3.1–9
November 24	Church discipline <b>Paper 2 due</b> ThM: Summary of chapter nine of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	4.11.1–3, 5 4.12.1–11
December 1	Baptism <b>ThM paper due</b> ThM: Summary of chapter ten of <i>Unaccommodated</i> due	4.15.1–6, 13–15 4.16.1–9, 17, 19–22
December 8	FINAL EXAM	

### Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to demonstrate punctuality and attend all class sessions. Any absences should be communicated to the professor beforehand. Students may miss up to three classes with impunity.

[NOTE: Standard BTS Attendance Policy is that students may not miss any more than three classes without a course penalty. Given the reality of distance-based students and video conference options, if students **clearly identify at the beginning of the semester that they will primarily be asynchronous students (depending on the digital recording of class because of a conflict with their schedule)**, then the student may attend without incurring a penalty for their “absences,” providing they are turning in all their work on time. Please see the BTS Faculty Handbook for more information on synchronous and asynchronous video conference students and policies and the commitments a faculty member agrees to when they teach a video conference or a live hybrid class]

### Class Policies and Procedures:

- BTS highly recommends using handwritten note taking methods in class and keeping computer usage to a minimum.
- Other electronics should be used sparingly.
- All assignments must be submitted by email by 11:59 (CDT/CST) on the due date.
- Late assignments will incur a -3 point deduction per weekday after the due date, except in cases of emergency communicated to the professor.
- Missed tests/exams may only be made up with an excused absence, preferably in advance of class. Excused-absence tests/exams must be made up before the final day of the semester.

### **Video Conference Policies and Procedures:**

- Please utilize the BTS “Best VC (Video Conference) Practices” information for the course.
- Laptops/Desktops are the preferred method of attending a video conference course. Information will be shared on the screen, so phones will be less useful.
- In Video Conference, it is preferable for the student to keep their video on (when possible) so that students and faculty may engage with one another. Extended periods of dark screen will result in follow-up and potential removal from class.
- Other electronics should be used sparingly.

### **Course Bibliography / Extended Bibliography**

- RC Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*
- David Hall & Peter Lillback, *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*
- Douglas Wilson, *A Study Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*
- Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. by Lyle Bierma

### **GRADING CRITERIA AND ASSESSMENT RUBRIC**

<b>A to A-</b>	<b>B to B-</b>	<b>C to C-</b>	<b>D to D-</b>
Correct spelling and grammar/punctuation	Minor errors in spelling or grammar/punctuation	Multiple errors in spelling or	Difficult to read due to English writing errors

Smooth writing that provides for effective and efficient reading	Writing is acceptable, but not as organized and coherent	grammar/punctuation per page Writing is not smooth, sometimes confusing and inconsistent	Writing lacks clarity, focus, structure, and is incoherent
Person and format are proper for assignment	Person and format are inconsistent	Person and format are not appropriate	Person and format are totally inappropriate
Scripture, paraphrases, quotes, and summaries are appropriately used, cited, and clearly supports main argument	Scripture, paraphrases, quotes, and summaries are appropriate but need more depth and use of critical thinking	Scripture, paraphrases, quotes, and summaries are inadequate for main argument and do not reflect understanding	Scripture, paraphrases, quotes, and summaries are improperly used, over used, under used, or cited in error
Paper completely conforms to Turabian's <i>Manual for Writers</i>	Paper generally conforms to Turabian's <i>Manual for Writers</i>	Paper somewhat conforms to Turabian's <i>Manual for Writers</i>	Paper does not conform to Turabian's <i>Manual for Writers</i>

## BTS Outcomes Evaluation

**Please rank each outcome on a scale of 1-5**

**1: this outcome is not covered in this class**

**2: this outcome is only touched on in this class**

**3: this outcome is discussed in conjunction with class material**

**4: this outcome lightly assessed as part of course assessment (one assignment)**

**5: this outcome is fully integrated into the assessment of this course (multiple assignments)**

1. Scripture: Students will effectively articulate the truth of Scripture and Scripture as truth, engaged with learning biblical knowledge and reformed principles of the supremacy of Scripture as God's word.
2. Reformed Theology: Students will be able to engage and reproduce the primary and essential elements of Reformed Theology.

3. Local Church: Students will be engaged in applied ministry projects in the local church
4. Wisdom: Students will grow in character; increasing in their demonstration of wisdom and its fruits.
5. Discipleship: Students will be able to understand and articulate the nature and importance of discipleship—both ordinary (means of grace) and extraordinary (biblical counseling).
6. Communication: Students will grow in the efficacy of their communication (articulation, teaching/speaking, and preaching—respective to various departments) both in content knowledge and rhetorical strategies.
7. Worldview: Students will demonstrate a growing ability to apply God’s word to all spheres of life, evidenced through class discussion and other assigned assessments.
8. Leadership: Students will grow in their understanding of godly leadership and ability to lead others in service of the local church.

Outcome	Rank	Rationale (one sentence)
Scripture	4	The students will learn about the analogy of the faith, how theology works in service of a consistent and faithful interpretation of the Scriptures
Reformed Theology	5	The <i>Institutes</i> is one of the essential, foundational writings of reformed theology. As such, the work provides an accessible, lucid overview of many of the core questions addressed in reformed theology
Local Church	1	
Wisdom	4	Familiarity with the <i>Institutes</i> gives students confidence in their own convictions by presenting the material as an integrated whole. Having experience with this valuable tool of reformed theology provides a resource that can be consulted as need arises.
Discipleship	3	Calvin’s fervent call to the Christian life that comprises a part of the <i>Institutes</i> encourages readers to complete devotion to God
Communication	3	Calvin was trained in rhetoric and, when properly adapted to modern sensibilities, can serve as a model for theological exposition
Worldview	4	Calvin’s <i>Institutes</i> describes a world in which God is actively and completely providential and to whom mankind should turn for all their hope and needs
Leadership	1	