CH 723 The Theology of John Calvin

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The Theology of John Calvin

CH 723 (Summer)

J. Steven O’Malley, Instructor

Class Description and Objectives:

An examination of the life and thought of John Calvin, with primary attention given to the study of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Our purpose is to gain a working knowledge of Calvin’s theology in its historical context, that will enable the student to interact with central themes of Calvin’s thought as they relate to the responsibilities of Christian ministry. Hopefully the student may also be assisted in advancing the dialogical and ecumenical objectives of attaining greater common understanding between the Reformed and Wesleyan/Arminian communities of faith.

Prerequirements:

CH 501-502 or its equivalent.

Textbooks:

For purchase:


F. Wendel, John Calvin (Baker reprint)
Collateral:

J.T. McNeill, The History and Character of Calvinism (Oxford)

D. Steinmetz, Calvin in Context (Oxford)

A. McGrath, The Life of John Calvin

Reserve:

K. Rowe, Calvin Bibliography

Calvin’s Commentaries

Class Procedures:

1. There will be lectures on the life and thought of Calvin, with reference to his 1559 edition of the Institutes. Students are required to attend all class sessions and complete all assigned readings. A reading report is to be submitted on the last day of the class. (30 points)

2. There will be three class learning exercises, reflecting the pro/contra/reply format on a team approach. Class members will be divided into three working teams for these exercises, and 3-5 page briefs (double spaced, and documented where appropriate) will be prepared by each team for two of these exercises, for presentation on the day of the exercise. Copies of briefs are to be prepared for all class members. (Crusaders, Prophets, and Evangelists) (20 points for brief, 10 points for presentation). (60 points)

3. Two individual briefs (or position statements) will be selected and prepared in relation to the other 17 pro/contra exercises (4-5 pages, double spaced, and documented where appropriate). They will be presented in class according
to the schedule below, with copies to class members. (10 points for preparation of brief, 10 points for presentation and defense). Copies of briefs are to be prepared for all class members. (30 points each) (90 points)

4. There will be a final essay exam, whose purpose will be to integrate major aspects of Calvin’s thought. Questions for this exam will be given in advance of preparation. Three questions are to be answered. (75 points)

**Grading:**

Completion of all course requirements is necessary to receive a passing grade. Upon completion of those requirements, grades will be assigned based upon the total accumulation of points, as follows: in the following manner:

Attendance and reading report: 30

Two group learning exercises
(20 points for writing, 10 points for its delivery and defense.): 60

Two briefs (20 points for its writing; 10 points for its delivery and defense): 60

Final Essay Exam (three 25-point questions): 75

Total: 225 points
Grade Evaluation based upon accumulated points:

202-225 A (90-100%)

180-201 B (80-90%)

157-179 C (70-80%)

135-156 D (60-70%)

below 134 F
Class Schedule:  (Readings from the Institutes:  1.1-5, etc.)

Tuesday, June 8  -- Introduction  to the class and to “Calvin and the Reformation”

  – Introduction  to Calvin’s Life and work,  and the
    historiography of
    John Calvin

June 9  –Calvin and the Reformed Tradition  (McNeill on History and
  Character of Calvinism)

  -- Studies on Book One begin – The Knowledge of God and
    the Place of Holy Scripture      (1.1-5, 6-12)

June 10 – Learning Exercise #1 (pro/contra/reply from Luther or Wesley)
(note: this is a practice session only)

  – Book One Contd. – Calvin on the Trinity, Creation, and
    Providence         (1.13-14, 16-18)

    Exercise #2 (pro_____________/contra_________________)  

June 11:
  Exercise # 3 (pro__________/contra___________________)

  – Studies on Book II begin;

  -- humanity created and fallen   (1.15 and 2.1-5)
Exercise #4 (pro_________________/contra__________________)

Tuesday, June 15:

Exercise #5 (pro_________________/contra__________________)
– law and gospel (2.6-11)

Exercise 6 (pro_________________/contra__________________)

June 16 – Person and Work of Christ (2.12-17)

Exercise 7 (pro_________________/contra__________________)

Exercise 8 (pro_________________/contra__________________)

June 17 -- Studies on Book III begin:

-- mystical union (3.1-2)

Exercise 9 (pro_________________/contra__________________)
– regeneration & justification (3.3-8)

Exercise 10 (pro_________________/contra(RC view___________________)

June 18: (3.10-11)

Exercise 11 (pro_________________/contra__________________)(3.19)
– Exercise 12 (pro_________________/contra__________________)(3.17-18)
Tuesday, June 22:

– Exercise 13 (pro______________/contra______________) (3:20)

-- eschatology &
    election (3.9, 21-24)

    Exercise l4 (pro______________/contra_______________)

June 23:

    Exercise l5 (pro______________/contra_______________)

    -- Studies on Book IV begin

    -- the Church (4.1-2.4)

    Exercise l6 (pro______________/contra_______________)

June 24: (4.5-6, 8-11 are optional, Reply to Sadoleto)

    Exercise 17(pro______________/contra: Sadoleto’s
    view______________/reply Anabaptist view_______________
    )

    (read also Calvin’s "Reply to Sadoleto")

    -- the Word, ministry,
        preaching, and disciplie (4.3, 12)

    -- baptism (4.15)

    Exercise 18 (pro______________/contra_______________)
June 25:

-- the Lord’s Supper (4.17)

Exercise 19 (pro__________/contra__________/reply__________)

-- church and state (4.20)

Exercise 20 (pro__________/contra__________)

-- Review and Conclusions

-- Final Exam (select two questions from the list of questions, dealing with issues not addressed in your personal briefs; also, write one question in response to the last question on the list, or, in response to how Calvin’s understanding of the Holy Spirit serves as a unifying theme for the Institutes.)

Exercises:

1. Calvin affirms the limited validity of natural revelation. (pro/contra/reply: Luther or Wesley) – group project

2. Calvin is inconsistent in defending “sola Scriptura” and also using non-Biblical language for God. Pro/contra

3. The doctrine of Providence is ably defended by Calvin against the options of chance and Stoicism. Pro/contra
4. It may be affirmed that Calvin’s doctrine of the creation of humanity in the image of God is illuminated when read in light of his understanding of evangelical faith. Decide if this is the case, and consider whether it is appropriate to understand creation in the light of soteriology. Pro/contra

5. Calvin’s doctrine of the fall successfully avoids the Manichean excesses of total depravity. Pro/contra

6. Calvin’s emphasis on the third use of the law does not conflict with his sola fideism. Pro/contra

7. Calvin’s doctrine of reconciliation blurs the distinction between the Old and New Testaments. Pro/contra

8. The way Calvin frames his doctrine of reconciliation permits the grace of God to prevail over His wrath. Pro/contra

9. Calvin’s assertion that “faith rests not on ignorance but on knowledge” (544) and that “faith is a firm and certain knowledge” (551) is consistent with his emphasis upon salvation through personal union with Christ. Pro/contra

10. Calvin’s understanding of the relation of faith and repentance is a faithful reflection of the biblical and patristic position of the early church. Pro/contra (Roman Catholic position)

11. Calvin’s emphasis on order in the Christian life is consistent with his understanding of Christian liberty. Pro/contra

12. Calvin’s emphasis on the need for good works by believers undercuts his sola fideism. Pro/contra

13. Calvin’s doctrine of prayer, which presupposes God may respond to human intercession, is difficult to reconcile with his doctrine of providence and predestination. Pro/contra
14. Calvin’s doctrine of predestination reflects his soteriological rather than his theological concerns. Pro/contra (argues it reflects both)

15. Calvin fails to resolve the problem of the universality of Christ’s reconciling work (2 Cor. 5:19) with the particularity of election. Pro/contra

16. Calvin’s insistence on the necessity of churchmanship is inconsistent with his doctrine of election. Pro/contra

17. Defend: Calvin’s distinction between the visible and invisible church. Pro/contra (Sadoleto’s view)/reply (Anabaptist view) group project

18. Calvin offers a compelling defense of infant baptism. Pro/contra

19. Defend: Calvin’s assertion that believers “eat Christ’s flesh”. Pro/contra (Zwingli)/reply (Luther) group project

20. By opposing tyranny, Calvin’s philosophy of government contains within it the seeds of democracy. Pro/contra