

A refugee writes a book

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In January 1535, a young French lawyer and theologian arrived in Basel as a refugee. Jean Calvin, born in 1509 in Noyon in Picardy, had studied law at Orléans and Bourges and humanities in Paris. He had converted to the evangelical faith in the early 1530s. After the Affair of the Placards in October 1534, when posters attacking the Catholic mass were displayed in Paris and even on the door of the royal bedchamber at Amboise, King Francis I launched a persecution of Protestants in France. Calvin, who was already under suspicion, left the country. He found refuge in Basel, where he lived quietly under an assumed name, studied, met scholars and wrote the book that would make him famous.¹

The book was the *Christianae religionis institutio*, the *Institution of the Christian Religion*. It appeared in Basel in March 1536, printed by Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lasius, in a small octavo volume of some five hundred pages in six chapters. It was preceded by a dedication to King Francis I, dated 23 August 1535, in which Calvin defended the French Protestants against the accusation of sedition and presented their faith as orthodox Christianity.² The book was a summary of the Reformed faith, organised around the Law, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the sacraments. It was intended both as a catechism for believers and as an apology addressed to the King.

The first edition of the *Institutio* was a modest book. Calvin expanded it in successive editions, in Latin and in French, until the definitive Latin edition of 1559, printed in Geneva, which had grown to eighty chapters in four books and became the most systematic and influential exposition of Reformed theology. But the first edition, printed in Basel, contained the essential ideas and established Calvin's reputation as a theologian at the age of twenty-six.

A few months after the publication of the *Institutio*, Calvin left Basel. He travelled to Ferrara, where the Duchess Renée of France protected

Protestants, and then returned briefly to France. On his way to Strasbourg in the summer of 1536, he passed through Geneva, which had adopted the Reformation a few weeks earlier. Guillaume Farel, the reformer of Geneva, persuaded him to stay and help with the organisation of the new church. Calvin remained in Geneva, with an interruption from 1538 to 1541, until his death in 1564.³ The companion volume describes how he shaped the church, the moral order and the economic ethics of Geneva. This chapter examines the Basel origin of his work and the Reformed ethics of credit that connects Basel and Geneva.

1 Notes

1. On Calvin's flight from France after the Affair of the Placards (17–18 October 1534), his arrival in Basel in January 1535 and his stay there under a pseudonym, see the standard biographies of Calvin; HLS, article "Calvin, Johannes". To be verified. ↩
2. Jean Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio*, Basel: Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lاسius, March 1536; dedicatory letter to Francis I dated 23 August 1535 (X. Calendas Septembres). See the standard bibliographies of Calvin's works. To be verified. ↩
3. On Calvin's stay in Ferrara (1536), his passage through Geneva in July/August 1536, Farel's appeal and his activity in Geneva (1536–1538 and 1541–1564), see the standard biographies of Calvin; the companion volume, *Genève, place financière internationale*, Part B. To be verified. ↩

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