

From conversion to the Institutes

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In the early 1530s, Calvin embraced the ideas of the Reformation. He would later speak, in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, of a “sudden conversion”, without specifying its date.¹ The French context then became dangerous for supporters of the new ideas. The address delivered on 1 November 1533 by the rector of the University of Paris, Nicolas Cop, a friend of Calvin, caused a scandal that forced both men to flee.² The Affair of the Placards, in October 1534, triggered severe repression of the Protestants.³ Calvin left France.

Having taken refuge in Basel, he published in 1536 the first edition of the *Institution de la religion chrétienne* (Institutes of the Christian Religion).⁴ The work, written in Latin, presents itself as an exposition of the Reformed faith, preceded by an epistle to King Francis I intended to defend the French Protestants against the accusations levelled at them.⁵ It is at once a manual of doctrine, an apologia and a plea. The very form of the epistle to the king bears the mark of the lawyer: in it Calvin pleads the cause of his fellow believers as an advocate before a judge.

The *Institution* went through several successive editions, which profoundly transformed its content. The second edition, published in 1539, is three times as long as the first, because Calvin added chapters on subjects treated in Melanchthon's *Loci communes*. In 1543 he enriched the work further and in particular expanded the chapter devoted to the Apostles' Creed. The definitive edition appeared in 1559: it then comprised four books and eighty chapters, each book being named after the articles of the Creed. The first book deals with God the Creator, the second with the Redeemer in Christ, the third with the way in which the grace of Christ is received through the Holy Spirit, and the fourth with the society of Christ, that is to say the Church.⁶

Calvin himself translated the *Institution* into French. The translation of 1541 is often regarded as one of the first great monuments of French

argumentative prose.⁷ This point is of direct interest to Part J of this work, devoted to the French language as an infrastructure of the Geneva financial centre. By choosing to write in French on the gravest questions, Calvin helped to make that language an instrument of theological, legal and moral reasoning, at the very moment when it was asserting itself as the administrative language of the Kingdom of France.

Edition	Characteristics
1536	first Latin edition, published in Basel; epistle to Francis I
1539	second edition, three times as long, enriched with chapters inspired by Melanchthon's <i>Loci communes</i>
1541	first French translation by Calvin himself
1543	enlarged edition, with an expanded chapter on the Apostles' Creed
1559	definitive Latin edition in four books and eighty chapters
1560	French translation of the definitive edition

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), art. "John Calvin": in the preface to the Commentary on the Psalms (1557), "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame"; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Calvin, Jean": "Definitively converted to the Reformation, he left the capital at the end of 1533". ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": rectoral address of Nicolas Cop of 1 November 1533; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Calvin, Jean": "definitively converted to the Reformation, he left the capital at the end of 1533". ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": Affair of the Placards in mid-October 1534, which forced Calvin to leave France; Institution de la religion chrétienne published in Basel in March 1536. ↩
4. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above. ↩
5. Wikipédia (fr), art. "Institution de la religion chrétienne": Christianae religionis institutio published in Basel in March 1536, preceded by an epistle from Calvin to King Francis I; Gallica, catalogue entry for the 1541 edition: "Avec la préface adressée au treschrestien roy de France, Francoys premier de ce nom : par laquelle ce présent livre luy est offert pour confession de foy" (with the preface addressed to the most

Christian King of France, Francis the first of that name, by which this present book is offered to him as a confession of faith). ↩

6. Article “John Calvin bibliography”, Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩
7. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Institution de la religion chrétienne”: Calvin “himself translated his work into French in 1541”, “the second time that French was used in a treatise of theology” and “also the first time that French prose expressed ideas with such precision, rigour and clarity”; Gallica, Institution de la religion chrestienne [...] composée en latin par Iean Calvin, et translétée en françois, par luymesme (1541). ↩

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