

John Calvin the Theologian Translates Himself:
John Calvin the Pastor in the 1541 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

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John Calvin is well known as a Protestant theologian, a leading voice in the Reformation; his most famous book, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, has had great influence down to the present. It is easy to overlook the fact that Calvin himself was a lifelong pastor and thought that one of his main tasks was teaching ordinary people to understand God's Word. We might think that there was a disconnect between these two callings, and that Calvin would address sermons to the people and theology to the scholars. In fact, however, Calvin the author of the Latin *Institutes* was also the translator of that same book; he wanted ordinary Christians to have access to the same ideas as the professors. But he also was a very perceptive person, and knew that the way to convey thought has to be fitted to the audience.

This presentation will examine how Calvin's own translation of the *Institutes* reveals how attentive he was to his audiences, and how the theologian spoke in pastoral terms, never talking down to the people but communicating so that they could understand. The introductory part will outline the various forms of the *Institutes* and their audiences, including notes about different languages and literacy in Calvin's day. The second part will sketch out the character of the 1541 French *Institutes* as a book, and give some of its obvious differences from the 1539 Latin. The third and longest part will discuss and illustrate the fascinating and subtle changes which Calvin made in the 1541 translation and what they tell us about his attention to his audience.

I: (Re)Introducing *the Institutes of the Christian Religion*

The Institutes of the Christian Religion is almost always read in its final edition, the one published in 1559 in Latin and 1560 in French. This is logical; Calvin himself said that it was his preferred form.¹ But something is lost when it is forgotten that this book was written and revised multiple times, over the course of almost 24 years, while Calvin himself developed from a learned young man to a pastor and teacher of pastors and leader of Reformed theologians. His purpose for the book also developed over these crowded years of ministry, and the audiences changed. So it is well worthwhile to do a little biographical examination of the *Institutes* itself, to see what it can tell us about Calvin as theologian and pastor.

There were five main editions of the *Institutes*. The first was a small book of six chapters, published in 1536 though it had been finished the previous year. This was intended to summarize the new "Protestant" teaching for Christians in France and Europe generally. Though it was written in Latin, it

¹ This essay is based on my translation of the 1541 *Institutes*: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion. 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009). The comparison is made with the reprinting of the 1539 Latin edition by Richard F. Wevers, *Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin 1539. Text and Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, 1983). Hereafter these will be noted as McKee 1541 with page number or Wevers with chapter:paragraph:line. Ideally, the comparison would include also the critical edition of the French by Olivier Millet, but in view of the length of the text this is cited only at specific points: Jean Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne (1541)*, edition critique par Olivier Millet (Genève: Droz, 2008); hereafter cited as Millet with the page number.

was a kind of catechism as well as a defense of the French Protestants to their king, Francis I, to demonstrate that they were devout and not heretical. Calvin was going to translate it into French but before he could do that he was called to serve in Geneva and there he decided to write a shorter French-language catechism. When he turned back to the *Institutes* in 1539, Calvin changed his purpose and audience. What was needed now was a handbook for new pastors, for those who knew the basics but needed a full outline of Protestant teaching. This time he did translate it, publishing the first French *Institutes* in 1541. A few years later in 1543 he produced the next Latin edition with more material on church government, and translated it in 1545. The fourth edition of the book in 1550 was not much larger but was better organized for reading, including numbered paragraphs, and this he translated to French the next year. After a gap of about eight or nine years, Calvin produced the final edition of the *Institutes* in 1559 and translated it in 1560. This 1559-1560 edition was much larger and completely rearranged; although almost all of the old content was maintained, the new part was extensive, and much of it came from the controversies of the intervening years. This big book was intended for scholars and theologians whose work was defending the faith; it was no longer the kind of book a pastor would use in ministry unless he was engaged in constant polemics.

There were reasons that Calvin published the *Institutes* in two languages, and it is helpful to see what that meant. Latin was the usual medium of all learned writing and discourse; it was the only way to communicate all across western Europe. It was also virtually the only language in which formal theology was done until the Protestant Reformation. Late medieval religious writings in the vernaculars – English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, etc. – were largely devotional, not systematic. When Protestants insisted on the priesthood of believers, they began to write theology in the vernacular. At first, however, this required developing the vocabularies more fully, as Calvin did when he began to write in French. Latin was a precise language with a long tradition of theological terminology. French was not yet standardized; besides lacking a lot of exact terminology it was also spoken somewhat differently in various parts of France.

Calvin used Latin to convey his thought to the learned audience of men who had been to university or had equivalent educations. He used French to speak to the great mass of people whom he was trying to teach to understand the Bible in a new way. The great majority of people were illiterate, though a growing number of city dwellers were able to read and often to write their own vernaculars. The limited number of literate people did not mean that everyone else was ignorant, however, because there was a long tradition of reading aloud, so one person who could read Calvin's French *Institutes* aloud could inform a whole community.

II: The 1541 French *Institutes*

Calvin translated the second edition of the Latin *Institutes* into French, publishing it in 1541. It is important to remember where this first French *Institutes* fits in time. The Protestant Reformation was still very new in France. The first Protestant translation of the New Testament was published in 1535, a time when most people had never seen a whole New Testament in any language, much less in their own vernacular. While conflict had been going on in Germany since 1520, the French king had been generally open to reforms within the Catholic church and persecutions had been fairly limited; that had changed in 1534. The people Calvin addressed were in need of basic teaching, and the first *Institutes* was meant to help give a basis for the new French Protestants to be able to articulate their faith. Next

they needed pastors who could guide them, but there were no trained Reformed ministers yet. These new local leaders had to teach themselves how to explain their new more biblical understanding of faith. Traditional theological texts were not based directly on the Bible and so they were no use for the new French Protestants. That is the context in which Calvin published the second edition of the *Institutes*, to fill this significant gap.

The 1541 French *Institutes* was not only the first handbook for French Protestant pastors; it also has a particular character as a piece of writing. It was essentially translated as a continuous text. What does that mean? All the later editions, especially the long 1559 one, were cut-and-paste books: very good cut-and-paste! Calvin was a master of Latin and French. But inevitably, when a book is made up of new sections inserted into older ones, even with fine transitions, there is a little bit of unevenness. For example, some parts of 1559, which are taken from polemical treatises, are denser than the earlier sections. In 1541, by contrast, the writing flows beautifully and smoothly, since it was translated as a whole. In fact, later French scholars came to regard the 1541 *Institutes* as one of the founding texts of modern French literature – even when they did not like the theology, they said the language was elegant.²

The French of 1541 is a translation of the Latin 1539, though the appearance is a little different. Calvin kept the more pastoral title of the first edition; he calls this *Instruction in the Christian Religion in which is contained a Summary of Piety and Almost All that it is Necessary to know about the Doctrine of Salvation*. In the Latin of 1539 he had changed the title to *Institutes of the Christian Religion now truly corresponding to its title* (i.e., the reference to being a sum of piety is omitted but Calvin affirms that now the book really fulfills its claim to be a complete theology). In a way, this title is a tip-off to the fact that in the French translation he is concerned with ordinary people rather than scholars, though the contents are still aimed at new young pastors. Also, the order of the latter part of the book is changed. The chapter on the “on the five other ceremonies falsely called sacraments, that is, confirmation, penance, extreme unction, ecclesiastical orders, and marriage” (which Protestants did not consider to be sacraments) comes immediately after the chapters which explain baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the two sacraments which Protestants affirmed as given by Christ. The Latin had put this chapter on false sacraments much later,³ but Calvin apparently thought that new believers, living in a context where all seven of the traditional sacraments were constantly in practice around them, would find it easier to have the whole discussion of sacraments together. Those are the formal, easily visible changes, but they are far from being the total.

² The French of the 1541 *Institutes* is today considered beautiful, but in fact at the time Calvin wrote it did not conform to the best standards for translation because it was so much closer to Latin than to spoke French style. Over the course of the later editions, Calvin shifted his style more and more toward the canons of French. One result was that modern scholars have regarded his later translations as very poor. This is a consequence of the changing standards of what constitute good French: what his contemporaries considered too stiff and Latinate became admired later when the ideals of good French changed. For a full discussion of Calvin’s translation practices, including the judgment of scholars on the elegance of the 1541 *Institutes*, see Francis Higman, “Calvin and the art of translation,” in Francis Higman, *Lire et découvrir. La circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme* (Genève : Droz, 1998), pp. 371-89.

³ Chapter 13 in French, chapter 16 in Latin.

III: Subtle Changes Demonstrating that the Theologian is a Pastor

There are a range of fascinating and often subtle indications in the French 1541 *Institutes* that Calvin the Latin-writing theologian was also Calvin the French-speaking pastor. Some of the categories of changes could be classified as attention to the different educational level of his French audience and sensitivity to cultural and contextual expectations which would make the text easier to grasp. Others show that Calvin took into account social and gender factors, and that he felt himself to be their pastor who needed to exhort them and not simply speak as an objective teacher. Some other changes suggest that Calvin was particularly conscious of issues which might confuse laity who for the first time were reading the Bible for themselves and needed guidance on theological issues. A final category of changes show that the theologian in exile in Geneva was aware that his readers were living in a context of persecution and needed their faith to be expressed in concrete terms that they could feel personally.

Education and Culture: There are many little signs that Calvin knew that his French-language audience did not have the same educational background as university-educated men who read Latin. He does not talk down to the laity, but he makes a concerted effort to enable them to follow the meaning without dumbing down the content. The simplest form of accommodation to lay ignorance was to insert brief explanatory words to identify persons from antiquity. The French text adds the words “Roman emperor” or “philosopher” or “heretic” or “bishop” or some other noun where the Latin merely gives the names; so Caligula becomes “Caligula, a Roman emperor,” Seneca becomes “Seneca, a pagan philosopher,” the Anomeans have “a sect of heretics” added to their name, Eucherius has “bishop of Lyons” added to his.⁴ Sometimes the Latin makes an allusion which would be obvious to a learned audience without giving a name and the French supplies a fuller identification: the Latin “that rhetorician” becomes “Demosthenes, a Greek orator,” the Latin “that holy man” becomes “Nectarius, of whom we have spoken above.” At other times a generic term is substituted for the name given in Latin: Solon becomes “legislateurs.”⁵ Occasionally this technique is applied to Biblical figures, e.g., the French calls Hannah “the mother of Samuel,” evidence that Calvin did not expect his readers to know all the characters of less familiar Bible stories, either.⁶

Some names Calvin appears to think are common knowledge, for example Plato, Aristotle, Cicero. At other times a figure is cited by name in the translation with no more identification than is given in the Latin: Solon, Cato, Catiline and Camillus, Helen, Lactantius and Eusebius, Laurentius Valla, Basil the Great, Isidore,⁷ perhaps because the context made it clear, perhaps because some names would be familiar from popular stories (e.g., Helen of Troy), perhaps simply because Calvin was not always watching carefully to be sure he gave his French readers the usual clues.

Another way Calvin helps his less educated readers is by dropping or altering classical allusions or examples. Sometimes he substitutes a common term or proverb. A long classical comparison of Attilius Regulus and Augustus Caesar becomes a simple story about the difference between a person in prison and one who rules the earth; “synecdoche” becomes “a part for the whole”; “hellebore” becomes “medicine”; a learned allusion to words by Plautus (who is not actually named) becomes in French a

⁴ Wevers 1:2:35, 17:13:18, 4:21:23, 2:11:16. McKee 1541, pp. 26, 696, 200, 64.

⁵ Wevers 2:12:34, 5:21:26, 14:1:17; McKee 1541, pp. 66, 293, 628.

⁶ Wevers 9:19:26; McKee 1541, p. 477.

⁷ Millet, pp. 1595, 1712, 317, 1391, 424, 200, 1057, 1440; McKee 1541, pp. 663, 710, 81, 576, 132, 426, 446, 598.

simplified summary: to “seek what is not there.”⁸ At other times the French text may entirely omit the classical reference, e.g., a Ciceronian proverb.⁹ Here there are also occasional examples of a simplification in scriptural references; where the Latin gives names for those who made the tabernacle in the wilderness, the French just refers to them as “gifted by the Holy Spirit” for the task.¹⁰

Sometimes a classical comment in the Latin will be extensively re-written for the French audience; for example an illustration of cultural differences seen in Greek palliades and Roman togas is summarized as “clothing” and a local example of the heraldry of French and English banners is inserted: “They add metaphors to make their saying more clear and plain, as: in war one distinguishes the French and the English from each other by the fact that the French wear a white cross and the English a red cross, as also the Romans were distinguished from the Greeks by the difference of their clothing.”¹¹ At other times Calvin will add to the French explanations which would be unnecessary for university-educated men. For example he inserts a definition of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, though in the Latin he only discusses the weaknesses of each form of government; or he explains “anthropomorphites” as “those who imagine a physical God.”¹²

Rather naturally, the number of Greek citations of scriptural words is greatly reduced in the French. Most of the time the idea is given without any reference to the Greek, but sometimes Calvin seems to consider a particular word or concept either sufficiently important and/or sufficiently comprehensible to be named and explained. “When St. Paul mentions the redemption done by Him, he commonly calls it in Greek *apolytrosis* (Rom. 3[24]; 1 Cor. 1[30]; Eph. 1[7]; Col. 1[14]), which signifies not simply redemption as the common language understands it, but the price and satisfaction that we call *ransom* in French.”¹³ Here the Latin does not use the word “ransom” and it also gives another Greek word, *antilutron* [1 Tim. 2:6], but the French goes on to convey the sense without further reference to the Greek.

In the Latin *Institutes*, citations of Greek are more common than Hebrew and so it is not surprising that the same proportions are maintained in the French, though in much reduced form. References to a Hebrew word are extremely rare in the translation; once the word Elohim is used but in the other place where the Latin discusses that term the French merely says “a Hebrew word.” The Latin discussion of “messiah” (*meschiaie*) is given in French as “God’s anointed,” and “Christ” is explained the same way.¹⁴ On several occasions in both the Latin and the French there are critical remarks about the Vulgate, but the Latin usually does not bother to identify it, while the French calls it “the common translation.”¹⁵

While comments on Biblical languages are rare, Calvin frequently adds brief explanatory words for specific texts. These can be simply to clarify; for example, in 2 Cor. 1:20 where Paul says the promises

⁸ Wevers 2:24:163-66, 3:6:6, 5:26:13, 16:8:8. McKee 1541, pp. 99, 121, 298, 592.

⁹ Wevers 5:22:1-2; McKee 1541, p. 293.

¹⁰ Wevers 2:14:74; McKee 1541, p. 70.

¹¹ Wevers 10:9:8-9; McKee 1541, p. 502.

¹² Wevers 15:4:29; McKee 1541, p. 651. Wevers 3:11:67; McKee 1541, p. 132.

¹³ Wevers 5:32:69-71; McKee 1541, p. 305; cf. Wevers 10:2:11; McKee 1541, p. 496. More common is the practice of replacing a Greek word (e.g., *ephemeron*) with an explanation (“lives one day”); Wevers 17:19:59; McKee 1541, p. 704; cf. Wevers 10:3:12; McKee 1541, p. 497.

¹⁴ Wevers 4:24:3, 1:12:35, 15:72-73; McKee 1541, pp. 203, 45, 678.

¹⁵ Both refer to “common translation” [Vulgate] as being inaccurate: Wevers 4:4:26-27; McKee 1541, p. 202. Latin omits but French says “common translation”: Wevers 2:20:164-65; McKee 1541, p. 88.

are “‘amen’ in Christ,” Calvin adds “that is, they are ratified in Him”; or he explains Hosea 14:2: “‘the sacrifices of our lips’: that is the satisfaction which is only thanksgiving”; or he inserts a note of explanation about practices in Genesis (6:18, 9:8-17, 17:2): “The ancients, in order to confirm their agreements, had the custom of killing a sow.”¹⁶ Naturally, the explanations are frequently a theological interpretation. On 2 Cor. 5:19, where the Latin says “the one who was pure and clean of sin was made sin for us,” the French adds “that is, was made the Sacrifice onto whom all our sins were transferred”; on Eph. 5:26 the phrase “word of life” is explained “which is the gospel”; on Rom. 12:6 the Latin says “all scripture ought to be measured according to the proportion and likeness of faith” and the French inserts “which always has regard to the promises.”¹⁷ Similarly, brief insertions are a common way to clarify theological topics. For example, Calvin explains “the difference between excommunication and execration, which the ecclesiastical doctors call ‘anathema’,” or he defines “indifferent things, which are not, in themselves, either good or bad.”¹⁸

Awareness of Auditors and New Converts: Sometimes these additions are less for information than for ease in following the thought: a Biblical speaker is named before a quotation which the Latin does not bother to introduce, or other figures are identified. Some examples: “whom St. Luke mentions,” “thus says Jeremiah,” “by Moses,” “according to the prophet,” “David says.”¹⁹ A particularly helpful aspect of this category of clarifying additions is the way that the French often replaces Latin pronouns or the implied subjects found in the endings of verbs with nouns or even phrases. For example, French says “our pharisees” or in another place “these good people of whom we have spoken” where the Latin has the subject implicit in the verb; or the Latin pronoun “*isti*” (these) becomes in French “the dreamers against whom we speak.”²⁰ This is partly a function of the difference between the highly inflected Latin language and the much less tight grammar of French, but it is also almost certainly a function of Calvin’s awareness that his vernacular text was more likely to be read aloud. For auditors, having subjects named frequently would be an important factor in keeping the argument straight. Another demonstration of this principle is the way that Calvin makes the presentation into the conversation. Often where questions are implied in the Latin, the French goes a step further, and at least several times it inserts “But someone will object” or “someone will ask.”²¹ The flow of the Latin is made more accessible by this emphasis on dialogue in the French.

The additions also provide a pastoral kind of reflection or exhortation or safeguards for distinguishing good teaching from traditional misinterpretations. When discussing the situation of the elect before their calling, Calvin adds: “As it sometimes happens that our Lord does not reveal Himself at first to His faithful but allows them to walk for some time in ignorance before He calls them.” To French believers worrying about family members who had not converted to the gospel, this would be very comforting. With reference to the instruction in Gal. 6:10 to pray for the household of faith, Calvin inserts a helpful comment on that vexed question of who should be included here: “These are those whom we know,

¹⁶ Wevers 4:11:3, 5:32:84, 10:3:2-3; McKee 1541, pp. 187, 306, 496.

¹⁷ Wevers 6:5:23, 11:1:21-22, 11:14:13; McKee 1541, pp. 325, 511, 523.

¹⁸ Wevers 4:53:71, 13:9:1-2; McKee 1541, pp. 253, 626.

¹⁹ Wevers 4:12:40, 5:32:35, 6:32:33, 6:32:34, 6:35:2; McKee 1541, pp. 189, 304, 366 (bis), 372.

²⁰ Wevers 6:42:1, 8:2:20, 7:5:1; McKee 1541, pp. 380, 416, 395.

²¹ Wevers 2:24:83-88, 3:24:49-50, 17:21:12, 8:13:14; 6:32:21; McKee 1541, pp. 102, 161, 706, 435, 365.

inasmuch as we can judge, are presently the true faithful and servants of God.”²² Here there is no absolute identification of elect and no statement about the future, but simply a practical guide “inasmuch as we can judge” for the present. In discussing the sacraments Calvin is not satisfied with the Latin word “signs” but adds in French “or sacraments which the Lord left and commanded to His church,” to reinforce for his lay audience the definition of true sacraments as only established by God by explicit command, lest they be confused by the traditional teaching on things like extreme unction based on James 5.²³

At times the additions also give concrete examples to illuminate the application of scripture, as when Calvin explains how rulers can exercise judgment without breaking the sixth commandment: “just as when a prince forbids all his subjects to carry an offensive weapon or wound anyone, he nevertheless does not prevent his officers from executing the justice which he had particularly committed to them.”²⁴ At other times, the additional words can function to help the reader make logical connections by indicating the movement of the argument or repeating words or phrases: “We can explain this with metaphors”; “As I have said, concerning the second article”; or “I concede that it would be desirable for it to be otherwise.”²⁵

Gender: One of the other very subtle changes gives some insights into Calvin’s awareness that women are part of the community of faith. He is certainly not conscious of gender as it is discussed in the modern world, but it is important to note something that has too long been overlooked, which is that Calvin knew that his congregation and his vernacular audience were not solely male. The clue is in an analysis of the language he uses for human beings. The Latin normally refers to human beings with the word *homo*, equivalent to the Greek *anthropos*, and uses *vir*, meaning a male person, in much the same way that Greek uses *aner*. The Latin of 1539 counts 1017 instances of forms of *homo*, and only about 34-40 of *vir*.²⁶ The French has no equivalent distinction between human being and male person, and thus the word *homme* stands for both. The curious thing, however, is that where Calvin employs *vir* in Latin he usually does not use *homme* in French unless he is citing a Biblical verse which has the equivalent of *vir*!²⁷

Most often the French parallel for *vir* is “personnage,” though it can also be one of several other words or phrases, including proper names, a change of persons (from “men” to “we”) or a generic word such as “each one” or “the wicked.”²⁸ For example, in the letter to Francis I, “those men/ *illi viri*” becomes “holy

²² Wevers 3:29:22, 9:24:23; McKee 1541, pp. 170, 481.

²³ Wevers 11:12:2; McKee 1541, p. 521.

²⁴ Wevers 15:6:12; McKee 1541, p. 663.

²⁵ Wevers 2:15:11, 2:15:16, 4:4:60-61; McKee 1541, pp. 71 (bis), 249.

²⁶ See Wevers, *Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin 1539. Text and Concordance. Volume I: Text and Indices*. “Lemma Frequency Index,” pp. 21, 51.

²⁷ For example, 7000 men in 1 Kg. 19:18 (OS 3, p. 24 line 14; Millet, p. 156; McKee 1541, p. 17). Jn 1:13 (Wevers 2:15:32; Millet, p. 298; McKee 1541, p. 71).

²⁸ Letter to Francis I, *illi viri* (OS 3, p. 18 line 5) becomes *sainctz personages* (Millet, p. 159; McKee 1541, p. 13). *Vir* is substituted for Augustine and French has *personnage* (Wevers 6:25:62; Millet, p. 895; McKee 1541, p. 354). *vir* for Noah, Daniel, Job where French has *personnages* (Wevers 9:9:44; Millet, p. 1155; McKee 1541, p. 470); other Biblical characters (Wevers 15:2:27; Millet, p. 1588; McKee 1541, p. 659). *sanctus illi vir* becomes *Nectarius*, *homme renommé de sainteté et grande doctrine* (Wevers 5:21:26; Millet, p. 751; McKee 1541, p. 285). *Vir pius* becomes *nous* (Wevers 8:19:81; Millet, p. 1109; McKee 1541, p. 452). Sometimes the male emphasis is removed from a quotation and *vir* becomes *menteurs*, *mechants*, *iniques*, e.g., Ps. 26:4 & 9 (Wevers 6:35:8-9; Millet, p. 929;

personages/ *sainctz personnages*.” Later “devout man /*vir pius*” becomes “we/ *nous*”. In another place, the male emphasis is removed from a quotation of Ps. 26:4 &9 and man/ *vir* becomes liars, wicked/ *menteurs, mechants, iniques*.” In 1 Cor. 12:28 the senate of “weighty men/ *gravium virorum*” becomes “assembly of elders/ *assemblee des anciens*.” What is pertinent here is that Calvin clearly thinks of his Latin readers as men, but he just as plainly includes all the faithful among those he addresses in French. The phrase “good and truly studious men/*boni viri et veri studiosi*” of 1539 becomes “those who fear God and are zealous for truth” in 1541; the Latin says that opponents of the new teaching are vexing “orthodox and devout men/ *orthodoxos ac pios viros*” while the French calls the victims “the faithful.”²⁹ It is clear, then, that while the Latin *Institutes* was addressed to scholars whom Calvin assumed would be male, the French *Institutes* was consciously directed to the faithful who would include both men and women.

Theological Nuances: Naturally, Calvin also includes a variety of theological or polemical additions. Most of these are related to the sacraments. Here often an additional phrase guides the readers to resist Anabaptist or Roman Catholic interpretations. In the interests of time, one or two examples will be enough. For example, referring to the Anabaptists, the Latin says, “they mock the ordinance which the Lord made for circumcision” and the French adds “which is of the same value and consideration” [as baptism]. Discussing the differences between baptizing adults and infants, Calvin adds to the French “That this is so is not something we invent as our own mind pleases but we have certain assurance from scripture to make such a distinction.”³⁰ Referring to Rome, the Latin says that the water of baptism is “disdained and contaminated” by comparison with the oil (used in traditional anointing) and the French inserts sharply that the water “is God’s sign” (over against the human ceremony of oil).

Much the longest addition is a discussion of Acts 19:4-5 where Paul (re)baptizes the disciples who had not heard of the Holy Spirit. Calvin had already explained this same passage earlier in the chapter on baptism, and this repetition is dropped from later editions of the French.³¹ The understanding of Acts 19 does not differ in the two passages, but the application is slightly but perhaps significantly different. The first time Calvin uses the text (the explanation which is in both Latin and French) the point is rebaptism, i.e., his Anabaptist opponents claim Paul’s rebaptism of the disciples as legitimation for their own adult baptisms, discounting the rite applied to them as infants on the grounds of their ignorance of true teaching. Calvin responds that the meaning is that Paul laid hands on the people previously baptized in water, now giving them the baptism of the Holy Spirit such as happened on Pentecost.

When Acts 19 is discussed the second time, Calvin focuses on the issue of the ignorance of the infants being baptized. He sees the Anabaptist position as insisting that whenever a person learns God’s will better another baptism is necessary: “every one of us would have to have a river to be rebaptized, for who is there among us who does not recognize day by day great and weighty ignorance in himself? For every such acknowledgement he would have to run to a new baptism.” The later elimination of this section does not shortchange Calvin’s argument, but it is interesting to observe that precisely in 1541 he thought it was worth repeating this explanation to emphasize that the ignorance of infants per se should

McKee 1541, p. 372). In 1 Cor. 12:28 senate *gravium virorum* becomes *assemblee des anciens* (Wevers 15:2:20; Millet, p. 1587; McKee 1541, p. 659).

²⁹ Wevers 14:7:6-7; Millet, p. 1528; McKee 1541, p. 636. Wevers 4:21:4; Millet, p. 567; McKee 1541, p. 199.

³⁰ Wevers 11:17:5-6, 11:23:50; McKee 1541, pp. 526, 538.

³¹ Wevers 11:10:43-78, 11:25:60-61; McKee 1541, pp. 519, 542-43.

not hinder their baptism. The French chapter on baptism is also the locus of some of the longest passages which are different formulations of the Latin. Calvin sensed that French evangelicals particularly needed pastoral counsel on the Biblical arguments for infant baptism in light of the ways that simple readers might be led astray by the more literalist Anabaptist interpretation of the New Testament and *sola scriptura*.

Changes of Omission or Simplification: Having given a great deal of attention to additions to the French, it is also appropriate to note that besides adding explanatory words and phrases to his translation, Calvin also does the reverse. Not infrequently Latin words disappear from the French, and occasionally a whole sentence is dropped. Many instances seem to be related to finer points of teaching which Calvin did not consider essential for his French audience. As noted above, frequently the omissions are classical allusions.³² One notable theological omission is a long polemical sentence citing Gen. 1:26 in an argument about using this text to support the doctrine of the trinity.³³ Certainly Calvin teaches the trinity in the French translation, but apparently he decided that this particular piece of evidence would be more confusing than helpful.

Sometimes, the French formulation gives a slightly different or simplified form. At times the purpose was apparently an effort to find more concrete or specific words: for example, where the Latin says “in a purer age” the French has “in the early church,” or where the Latin refers to “the mysteries” or “mystical bread” the French has “Sabbath” or “celebrate the sacraments.”³⁴ Sometimes the differences suggest that Calvin is using words or concepts which will be more familiar or unambiguous; for example, instead of the “*substantia*” of the soul the French says “immortality,” instead of the “body of Christ” the French says “the company of the faithful.”³⁵ Some of the language about the Old Testament and Israel is expressed with a more traditional Christian flavor. This is evident in translations of Biblical passages, where for example “Jehovah” is regularly replaced with other more familiar names for God, such as “Lord,” “the Eternal,” or “God” meaning Jesus Christ.³⁶ Theologically Calvin clearly regards the Israel as the form of the church in the Old Testament, but in the Latin text his language usually maintains a distinction between the two dispensations, while the French tends to assimilate Israel to the Christian church.

French Protestants in the Midst of the Roman Catholic Church: Some of the theological shaping of the translation gives particular attention to points which are significant to Protestants, as if Calvin thought these should be emphasized when writing to people surrounded by the traditional church. One signal for this is the addition of references to the Bible and preaching, which are not always so explicit in the Latin; for example, once where the Latin says “sacraments” the French gives “word and sacraments.”³⁷ Small changes in the French also give it a more intimate or emotional quality, as Calvin remembered that the people he was addressing were living where confessing their faith was dangerous. The addition of personal pronouns, “+our own+ glory,” or “+my+sin,” invites the French faithful to enter more fully into the text. The translation of 2 Cor. 4:8 as “we endure poverty” instead of “we labor” gives a similar personal intensity. This shades over into the language of exhortation; for example, where the Latin says

³² See above nn.8ff.

³³ Wevers 4:13:44-49; McKee 1541, p. 215.

³⁴ Wevers 3:7:46, 3:15:29, 3:16:3-4; McKee 1541, pp. 124, 141, 145.

³⁵ Wevers 7:6:82, 8:15:90; McKee 1541, pp. 402, 443.

³⁶ Wevers 3:12:33, 4:24:19 & 29 & 34, 3:8:2 & 12, 4:26:48 & 49 & 50; McKee 1541, pp. 133, 203-204, 125, 207.

³⁷ Wevers 6:13:3; McKee 1541, p. 335.

let us “accuse ourselves... be justified in Him” the French repeats the idea in more extreme language; “that we be dead in ourselves so that we may be brought to life and vivified in Him.”³⁸

Shaping the Latin text to fit a particular lay audience, in France, is evident in the ways Calvin speaks the theologians of the medieval church. The words “scholastics,” “sophists,” “Sorbonnists,” and sometimes a reference to “the schools” appear in both Latin and French, but the proportions are significantly different.³⁹ The French almost never uses “scholastics” but it says “Sorbonnists” much more often, suggesting that for practical purposes people in France would see the theological faculty in Paris as not only among the most famous but also as the only scholastics in their sphere. Although Calvin does not say so, the repetition of the name Sorbonnists might well signify an intensified personal resentment toward these particular schoolmen – if not on his own part, at least on the part of French followers of the gospel who would identify the Sorbonnists as those who were persecuting them and who had condemned an increasing number of their fellow believers to exile and the stake.

IV: Conclusion

Calvin the theologian is also Calvin the pastor. This is evident not only in his sermons, but also in the *Institutes*. As translator of his own Latin, Calvin made the French *Institutes* the first Reformed handbook for pastors. As a close examination of his text demonstrates, the pastor in exile in Geneva was attending very carefully to the fellow believers he had left in France, and he made his major theological book a text that was fitted in very specific ways to communicate to this vernacular audience. Without ever condescending to them, he produced the material at the level they could grasp, and consciously included all the faithful, women as well as men. His words also demonstrate that he knew his hearers were Christians living “under the cross” who needed encouragement as well as instruction.

³⁸ Wevers 5:20:6, 17:17:3, 12:22:40; McKee 1541, pp. 291, 699, 567.

³⁹ “Canonists and scholastic theologians”: Wevers 5:39:9, and many other examples of *scholastici*, but this is the single use in French, McKee 1541, p. 282. “sophists of the Sorbonne”: Wevers 2:21:2; McKee 1541, p. 88. “sophists and Sorbonnists” in French (McKee 1541, p. 176) instead of *scholasticis sophistis* (Wevers 4:1:18); “theologians of the Sorbonne” in French (McKee 1541, pp. 188, 319) instead of *scholastici* (Wevers 4:12:9, 6:2:14). “schools of Sorbonne” in French (McKee 1541, p. 320) instead of *schools* (Wevers 6:2:28). “scholastics” (Wevers 6:18:1, 8:8:25) becomes “Sorbonnists” (McKee 1541, pp.343, 426). For more examples, see subject index in McKee 1541.